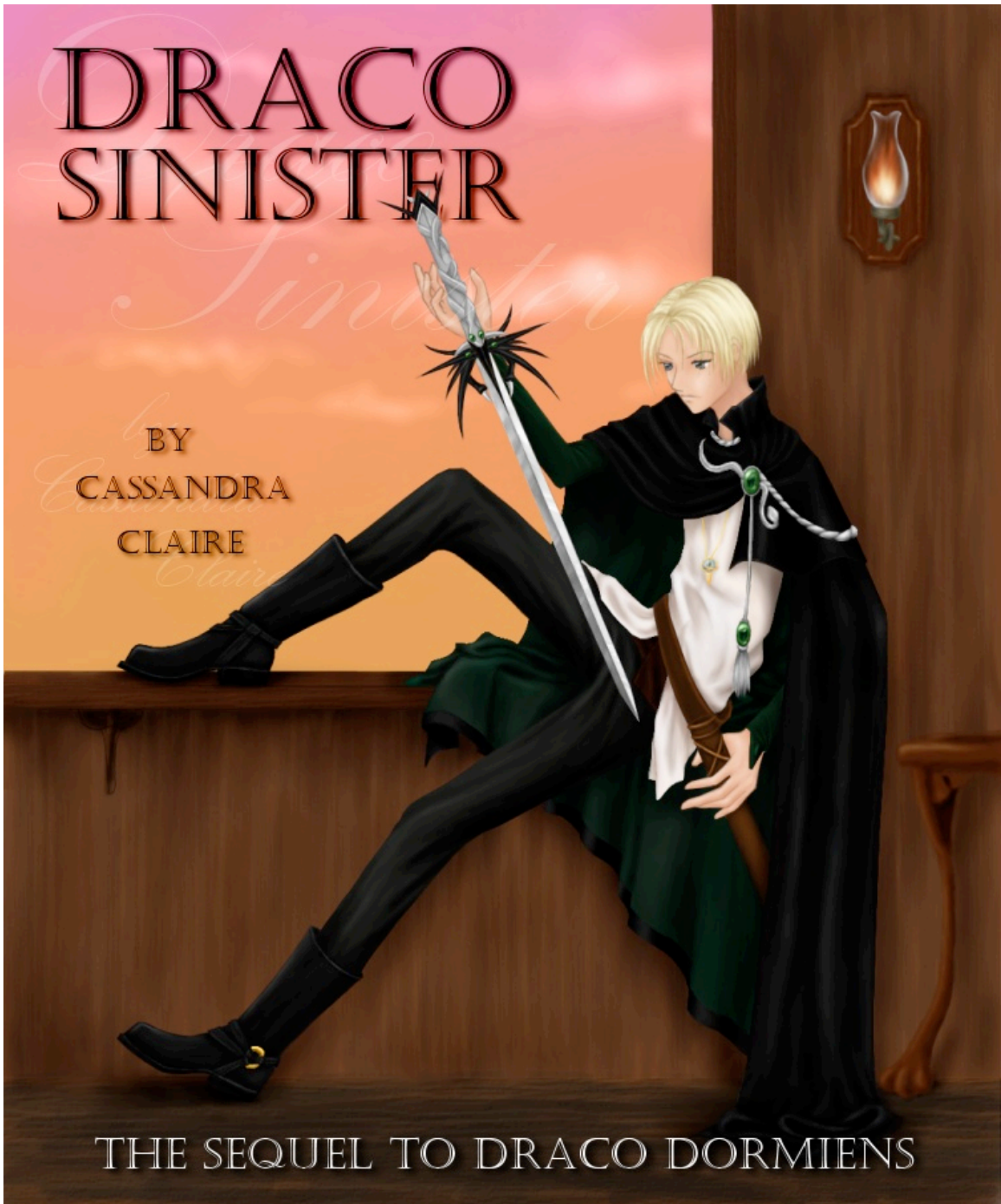


DRACO SINISTER

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THE SEQUEL TO DRACO DORMIENS



Draco Sinister

Part Two of the Draco Trilogy

By Cassandra Claire

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Author's Notes: This fanfiction is an AU: Alternate Universe. It was written in the year following Goblet of Fire and does not incorporate material from OOTP, HBP or JK Rowling's fansite, all of which post-date it. It posits a universe in which Sirius is still alive, and so is Dumbledore; Fudge remains Minister of Magic, Luna Lovegood does not exist, Blaise Zabini is a girl, Ginny's full name is Virginia, and so on.

Draco Sinister Chapter One: Bad Dreams

And again, the same dream: death and blood and terror. He lay in the mud on a battlefield, and all around him were scenes out of nightmare: goblins with sharp swords ran past him, carrying the decapitated heads of wizards in their fists; screaming giants tore men limb from limb with the force of their arms, and scattered the severed parts over the field like ghastly confetti. Everywhere were the screams of the dying and the dead. And blood, so much blood, he was covered in it.

A black horse reared up over him, pawing the sky with its hooves. It was riderless, but carried a banner: a silver dragon on a background of black. He covered his face with his arms as the sharp hooves came down---

Draco bolted awake, covered in cold sweat and feeling nauseated. He rolled over in bed and buried his face in his arms. It wasn't the first such nightmare he'd had; they'd been getting more and more frequent since he'd left Hogwarts for Magid school. He sat up in bed, letting the cold moonlight touch his face. If only there was someone he could talk to, could tell...

Harry? No. Not Harry. His mother? She was about to go off on holiday with Sirius, this would just worry her. Sirius? He toyed with the idea for a moment. Sirius was usually full of good advice and was hard to upset. But he might tell Narcissa.

And then there was Hermione.

Draco sat up and reached for his wand, which was on his bedside table. "Lumos," he whispered, and a small light blossomed from the end of it. He could of course have gotten light without the wand, but untrained Magids weren't supposed to perform "wandless" spells, or so he had been told.

He picked up a piece of paper and a pen and balanced the paper on

his knees, thinking. He wrote her name, *Hermione*, and then stopped. What if she told Harry? No. She wouldn't do that. But what could he tell her? Hermione, I'm having nightmares, the same dream every night, I don't know why. She'd think he was going mad, and perhaps he was. As his father had told him, there was madness in his family. And considering that his father was now a patient in St. Mungo's Treatment Center for the Criminally Insane, he hadn't been far off.

Draco sat there for a long time, staring at the blank piece of paper, unable to think of any words. Finally, he crumpled the paper up into a ball and tossed it out the window. Then he lay awake, staring at the ceiling until dawn.

Dear Hermione,

Thanks for writing me so soon -- it was great having a letter waiting for me when I arrived, and tell Mrs. Weasley that I appreciate the sweater she sent, even though it's boiling hot here, and the fudge as well, even though Draco ate it without asking. Did I mention that he and I are roommates? We're the only boys from England here for the program, so they stuck us together. I told them I'd rather be in with the guy from Transylvania who doesn't speak any English and won't go out in the sunlight, but it was no go.

This school is a lot like Hogwarts, in some ways: it's in a castle, actually a fortress that used to belong to Godric Gryffindor. I guess Godric had a lot of enemies and didn't mind who knew it, there are cannon emplacements everywhere, as well as a moat and some huge cauldrons that he probably been used to pour boiling oil down on enemy forces.

So far we've only had one class and nobody's said anything about teaching us how to use our powers, it's just all about control, controlling your emotions so you don't wind up lashing out with your powers and destroying a whole city block...or making it snow blue...but anyway, Draco already knows how to control his emotions, so I don't know what he thinks he'll be accomplishing

here. I suppose he just didn't want to hang around the Manor by himself all summer, it's full of Aurors at the moment anyway. Sirius and Narcissa said he could go on holiday with them in Greece, but I don't think he wanted to do that either. Can't blame him, really, I wouldn't watch to watch them snogging all over the Greek Islands myself. I guess I'll just have to accept the fact that a Draco-free life is probably impossible, especially since we're going to be related soon and we'll have to see each other at weddings and funerals for the rest of our lives. Speaking of which, Narcissa and Sirius set the date for August 15th, so start planning to be there-it'll be the first time I'll have seen you in nearly two months. I can't wait; I miss you all the time.

Guess who else is here, teaching? Professor Lupin! I guess it's not that weird, considering that Dumbledore runs this school and he's one of the few Headmasters out there who would give Lupin a job. It's great having him here, though; I'm actually looking forward to classes starting now. The only other person here who you would know is Fleur Delacoeur. Apparently she started manifesting her powers kind of late - she was already eighteen, and she's nineteen now, so this is her first year here. I guess Magid stuff is a lot more common among people with veela ancestry, which explains Draco as well.

I hope you're having fun staying at the Burrow while your parents are on holiday. Give my best regards to the Weasleys, and ask Ron if that new broom I got him is working well, it's meant to be a good one. Is Ginny back from France yet? Tell her I said hi.

Write me back, soon.

All my love,

Harry

Hermione smiled to herself, folded up Harry's letter, and put it in her pocket to read again later.

Ginny looked at her curiously across the table. "So? Any interesting news?" Pigwidgeon, who had been hooting madly all over the room

ever since he had successfully delivered Harry's letters, hopped onto Ginny's saucer, sloshing coffee all over the Weasley's clean-scrubbed kitchen table. "Pig, no! Gerroff!"

Ron reached out and caught Pigwidgeon in his hand. "No jumping in the coffee, Pig," he said, grinning at the twittering little owl. "Ginny doesn't like it."

"Whereas you love owl-flavored coffee," said Ginny, making a face at Ron. Then she turned back to Hermione, who had her chin propped on her hand and was staring dreamily off into space. "What does Harry say, Hermione? Is everything all right?"

"Of course it is, he's fine," said Hermione. "And he said to say hi to you."

Ginny flushed very slightly. She still retained the vestiges of her terrible crush on Harry, although she was nevertheless quite genuinely happy for Hermione. That was the thing about Ginny, thought Hermione, she was such a very nice person that it would be impossible to dislike her, although the two girls had never been close. Ginny had always seemed to Hermione to be a girl's girl -- more interested in clothes and boys than Hermione could imagine herself being, although her year at Beauxbatons had invested her with an appealing new gravity.

"Well, tell him hi from me when you write back," said Ginny, and became very interested in cleaning up the coffee Pigwidgeon had spilled.

Ron was scanning his own letter from Harry. "He says Fleur's a student there," he said. "I think Bill did tell me something about that, actually. I'd forgotten."

"Are she and Bill still together?" Hermione asked.

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. They're on, they're off, it's hard to tell. I think they're off at the moment, actually."

Hermione scowled. She did not like the idea of an unattached Fleur

being anywhere within ten miles of Harry. Or Draco. Although Draco was part veela himself and could probably fight her off better than Harry could. Also, it was none of her business what Draco did, she thought to herself, but really...he could do better than Fleur, she just knew he could.

With a mental shrug, she picked up the second letter Pigwidgeon had brought her. It was tied with a black velvet ribbon and her name was written in a slanting, almost-familiar hand. As she read it through, her mouth opened in surprise. "Well, that's odd!" she exclaimed.

"What's odd?" asked Ginny.

"It's from Viktor Krum," said Hermione.

Now Ron looked up as well.

"He's in London," said Hermione. "He wants to meet me for coffee at the Leaky Cauldron. He's staying there for a few days. He says he has something important to tell me."

"Oh, Harry's going to love that," said Ron, grinning.

"Don't be silly, Ron," said Hermione, putting down the letter with a frown. "I haven't even seen Viktor in two years. And last I heard, he had a girlfriend."

"Are you sure he doesn't want to meet you so he can tell you he loves you again?" said Ron teasingly.

"Quite sure," said Hermione, still frowning. "Well, I wouldn't mind seeing Viktor...and Ginny, didn't you say you wanted to go shopping in London? We could go together."

"Sure," said Ginny, and Ron added quickly, "I have to go to Diagon Alley anyway to get a kit for my new broom. We can all go."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Just let me write a quick letter first."

She ran upstairs to the spare room she was staying in. Although the Weasleys hadn't moved out of the Burrow when Fred and George's joke shop turned out to be so successful, they had added a number of extra rooms. From the outside, the house now looked more like a lopsided birthday cake than ever. Hermione's room was one of the new ones, and she liked it very much: it was round, with a stained-glass oriole window that depicted a weasel sleeping on a rock in the sun.

She sat down at the desk, took out a piece of paper, and started to write *Dear Harry...* and stopped. She wasn't very good at writing love letters, but she wanted to be a bit more affectionate than "dear". Especially if he was hanging around with Fleur. Couldn't hurt to remind him exactly whose Harry he was. She tried *Darling Harry*, but that looked stupid. Then she tried *Harry, my love*, but that was awful, and she scrunched the whole letter up into a ball and threw it on the floor. She tried again, with a new piece of paper, *Dearest Harry...*

Well, that looked all right. She scribbled the rest of the letter quickly, wrote a quick note to Draco, and bolted out of the room, nearly colliding with Ron on the stairs. "Hermione! Slow down!"

"Ron, can I borrow Pig?" she said quickly. "I'm sorry I stepped on your toe," she added, as an afterthought.

"I just sent Pig off to Fred and George with a letter. But you can borrow my mum's owl. Hey, Hermione, what's that?"

"What's what?"

"That," said Ron, and put his hand on her neck, where the collar of her shirt ended. It took her a moment to realize that he was fingering the thin gold chain around her throat. "You don't usually wear jewelry."

"Oh," she said. "This," and drew out the pendant that hung on the end of the chain. "It's Draco's Epicyclical Charm," she said, a little self-consciously. "He gave it to me."

Ron goggled at her. "Isn't that a little weird?" he said. "I mean, what if you dropped it, or forgot it somewhere, or..."

"Ron!" Hermione glared at him. "Like I'd ever do that. Anyway, Dumbledore put some charms on it, so it can't be lost or misplaced or damaged. I can't even take it off, and no one else can take it off me except either Dumbledore or Draco himself. It's charmed that way."

"I think you should just have given it to Dumbledore," said Ron, eyeing the Charm with mistrust. "Or Draco should have kept it. Can't he cart his own nasty little lethal object around with him?"

"I tried to give it to Dumbledore. But he said it was Draco's to do what he wanted with. And I don't think Draco wanted to keep it, it probably reminds him of horrid things, like his dad." She shuddered.

Ron took his hand off her neck and started to walk down the stairs. "Have I told you lately how extremely glad I am that you didn't end up dating Malfoy?"

"Only about six zillion times," said Hermione, following him. "Honestly, I think you're gladder than Harry is."

"I have my reasons," said Ron, and before Hermione could ask him to elaborate, he was yelling for Ginny to hurry up and bring the Floo Powder because it was time for them to get going.

The brown barn owl swooped in through an open window and landed, hooting, on the table next to Harry, who was sitting in the Students' Hall, eating lunch. It had two letters tied to its left leg, both rolled into neat little tubes and fastened with different-colored ribbons.

Harry glanced up and across the table at Draco, who was deep in conversation with Fleur Delacoeur. "Letters, Malfoy," he said.

Draco looked up and grinned. "Toss me mine," he said.

Harry unfastened one of the letters and threw it to Draco. Both of them knew who the letters were from; that went without saying. Hermione was an eminently fair girl. When she wrote, she always wrote to both of them, one letter for Harry, one for Draco. Harry's letter would be tied with a red ribbon, Draco's with silver. Harry occasionally wished that she would send him maybe two letters for every one she sent Draco, just to make a point, but that wasn't in Hermione's nature to do. She was a scrupulous sort of person.

Harry watched Draco open his letter, read it, and stick it in his pocket, all without changing expression. Harry would have given a sackful of galleons to see what was in that letter, but he would rather have died than admit it. After all, he trusted Hermione. She was his girlfriend. She loved him. Right?

Fleur looked from Harry to Draco with bright blue eyes. Harry knew she was probably nearly as interested as he was in seeing what Hermione had written to Draco. She had attached herself to Draco the first day they had arrived at school. Spotting him standing next to Harry, she had swooped over to them, crying, "'Ello, 'Arry! Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Harry had made the introductions, and Draco had shaken Fleur's hand while she beamed at him and tossed her shining silver hair. "Malfoy," Fleur had said. "I know that name, that is a French name. Is your family French?"

Draco had admitted that at one time, they probably had been.

"You are part-veela, are you not?" Fleur continued. "I am as well. I am sure we are related, I have brothers who look just like you. I take one look at you across the hall and think to myself, "That is a beautiful boy, he must be related to me!"

Fleur said this with no shred of humility. She was just as conceited as Draco, which in Harry's opinion lent a certain credibility to her assurance that they shared family.

"I think she fancies you," he had said to Draco once Fleur had gone, but Draco had shaken his head.

"We're both part-veela, we're immune to each other's charms," he'd said. "She just likes me because I look like her."

Whether or not they fancied each other, Harry thought, looking at them, they'd formed an effective mutual admiration society. Draco rarely went anywhere these days without Fleur tagging along at his heels. It was almost funny, Harry thought, after all he was the same age as Draco and it wasn't all that long ago that Fleur had considered him too "leetle" of a boy to be taken seriously...

The owl hooted again, snapping Harry back to attention. He gave the owl a Knute, took his red-ribboned letter, and tore it open eagerly.

Dearest Harry,

I can't write much because I'm rushing off to London, but I'll send you another letter later, by Pig. Ron and the Weasleys are fine. Mr and Mrs. Weasley have gone off to the seaside for a romantic holiday, and Fred and George are in Hogsmeade at the joke shop, so it's just me and Ron and of course Ginny, who is back from France and sends her love.

Guess who sent me a letter out of the blue? Viktor Krum, of all people. I would have thought he'd have been too busy to write anyone, he's been touring around with the Bulgarian team, but he's in London now, so I'm going to stop by the Leaky Cauldron and see him. I'll tell him you say hello. And please say hi to Professor Lupin for me.

I can't wait to see you at Sirius and Narcissa's wedding. I'm glad that Sirius is going to be happy, nobody deserves it more than he does.

All my love,

Hermione

Harry folded the letter up with a feeling of unease. When he glanced

up, he saw Draco and Fleur watching him. "What's wrong, 'Arry?" said Fleur with cheerful concern. "'As your girlfriend left you for someone else? Is she pregnant?"

The letter flew out of Harry's hands. "What?" he sputtered. "That's ridiculous. How would she be pregnant?"

Fleur and Draco both grinned at him.

"Perhaps now is the time to have that talk about the facts of life, Potter," said Draco, still grinning.

Bugger, thought Harry, I walked right into this one. "Shut up, Malfoy," he said. "I already know all about sex, thanks."

Fleur was giggling madly behind her hand.

"That *is* reassuring to hear," said a voice at Harry's elbow.

Harry spun around to see Professor Lupin standing behind him, a faint smile on his face.

"Hallo, Harry," he said.

Harry grinned at Lupin, who, he thought, was looking a lot better than he had three years ago. He actually seemed to have fewer lines on his face, although that could just have been the fact that he was very brown from the summer sunshine. They were all getting brown, including Draco, which seemed, in Harry's opinion, to go against all laws of nature. Surely it wasn't possible to be so very fair-haired and light-eyed and still not burn in the sun? But then again, Fleur was the same way. She and Draco were now both very brown, with bleached sugar-white hair. Harry himself had gotten darker, and had developed a row of freckles across his nose, which he had never known he had. He hoped they weren't too odd-looking. Hermione had freckles across her nose and he thought those were adorable, but it might be different for boys.

"Professor Lupin," said Harry, wrenching his mind off the topic of Hermione and her nose. "It's good to see you. Do you want to sit

down? Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Actually, I have," said Lupin. "I was just looking for you, Harry. And your roommate."

He inclined his head towards Draco, who raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Looking for me? Why?"

"Something Dumbledore told me," said Lupin, sounding a bit evasive. "I was wondering if we could go back to your room for a moment? There's something I wanted to ask you two about."

Harry and Draco looked at each other, shrugged, and stood up. "Sure," said Harry. "Why not?"

"See you later," said Draco to Fleur, who was looking mildly indignant at being abandoned.

Lupin walked ahead of them as they crossed the Hall and went up the stone staircase that led to the boys' dormitories.

"Did Hermione tell you she's seeing Victor Krum in London?" Harry asked Draco, and was rewarded by seeing him start slightly.

"Big overgrown Bulgarian git," said Draco, "What's she seeing him for?"

"He's not so bad," said Harry, feeling more magnanimous towards Krum suddenly. It was probably the fact that he had known something about Hermione that Draco hadn't. "Professor Lupin!" he called out, quickening his pace. "This is our room right here."

Draco opened the door and they all went in. It was a large stone room, big enough to house six or seven boys, although Harry and Draco were its only occupants. It had two fireplaces, one at each end of the room, a large bay window with a stone seat, and two beds hung with velvet hangings. Harry's trunk rested at the foot of his bed; Draco's at the foot of his.

Lupin sat down in a chair, while Harry and Draco each sat on the

ends of their respective beds. Lupin, Harry thought, was looking oddly uneasy, although he smiled at Harry when he caught Harry glancing at him.

"It's good to see you again, Harry," he said with a smile. "I don't know if I told you that."

"I've been looking forward to having your class all week," said Harry, smiling back at Lupin. "We've only had class so far with Professor Emble, and he just says the same thing over and over again."

"There are three words every Magid must take to heart," said Draco, quoting Professor Emble. "'Control, control, control.'" He grinned at Lupin. "I told him that was one word three times, but he didn't care."

"Control *is* important," said Lupin gently.

"Yeah, I know," replied Draco, looking unrepentant. "But I'm already good at that, so..."

"Which reminds me," said Lupin. "Draco, Professor Dumbledore wrote me to say that you were in possession of Salazar Slytherin's sword. He asked me if I would take a look at it. "

Draco shrugged. "If you like." He frowned. "But your hands-"

"The sword burns non-Magid humans," said Lupin calmly. "Being a werewolf, I should be able to touch it."

"Oh, yeah, the werewolf thing," said Draco, with candid interest. "That must really suck."

"DRACO!" said Harry in a warning tone.

But Lupin, surprisingly, was smiling as he looked at Draco. "You remind me so much of Sirius when he was young," he said. "It's really uncanny."

"So he was also charming and good-looking?" said Draco.

"Sirius told me that when he was in school he was obnoxious," said Harry.

"He was all of the above," said Lupin, still smiling. Harry had to admit it was nice to see Lupin looking pleased. It lit up his whole face and made his odd gold-green eyes shine. "Now, Draco..."

"Right," said Draco, hopping out of his chair, and going across the room to his trunk, which he threw open. He took the sword out, and held it up for a moment to look at it. In its own way, it was a very beautiful object; the sunlight from the window slid down the blade like water, and the green jewels in the iron hilt sparkled. "Here you go," he said, walking across the room and handing it to Lupin.

Lupin picked it up and turned it over, running his hand gently along the blade. "This is a very powerful magical object," he said.

Draco looked pleased.

"Do you mind if I try an experiment on it?" asked Lupin, turning the sword over and looking at it hard.

Draco shrugged. "As long as you don't break it."

Lupin turned the blade over, running his thin, flexible fingers along it. Then he said, "*Indicio!*"

Harry and Draco leaned over, staring, as writing appeared on the blade, carved into the metal. It was blackened with age and looked as if it had been there forever. *Descensus averno facilis est.*

"What does that mean?" asked Draco wonderingly.

Lupin looked as if he didn't quite understand either. "It's Latin," he said. "It means Easy is the Descent Into Hell."

"That's cheerful," said Harry.

"Are you sure it doesn't mean 'have a nice day'?" said Draco hopefully. "Or 'this sword is worth a lot of money'?"

"Or 'I belong to a massive git'?" suggested Harry.

"No," said Lupin. "It means what I said it means."

Both Harry and Draco looked uneasy. "I dunno what that's about," said Draco. "But it sounds bad."

"Salazar Slytherin was not the nicest man," said Lupin. He stood up. "With your permission, Draco, I'd like to take this sword back to my office and look at it more closely."

"Go ahead," said Draco, who was now looking at the sword with suspicion. "But no running in the hallway!" he added as Lupin turned to leave. "That thing is sharp."



As they neared the Leaky Cauldron, Ginny checked her watch. She and Hermione had promised Ron they'd meet him back at Flourish and Blott's at three o'clock, and it was already two, which didn't leave Hermione a lot of time to have coffee with Krum.

Ginny cast a sideways glance at Hermione, who was looking very smart and pretty in a short red coat. She seemed slightly nervous, as Ginny supposed she would be too if she was going to meet someone she hadn't seen in two years, who had once been violently in love with her and for all anyone knew, might still be. Of course, as far as

Ginny knew, no one had ever been violently in love with her. Not Harry, who she still loved...not anyone.

"We're here," said Hermione, stopping under the sign of the Leaky Cauldron. "Come in with me, won't you?" she added, looking at Ginny hopefully.

"Sure," said Ginny, and started up the stairs with her. They ducked into the dark main room of the Leaky Cauldron, which was nearly empty. Ginny was squinting around, her eyes adjusting slowly to the lack of light, when a huge shape suddenly loomed up out of the dimness.

"Her-my-own-ninny," said a gravelly voice.

Hermione caught Ginny's hand and squeezed it nervously. "Viktor!" she said. "It's so good to see you."

The passage of three years hadn't changed Viktor Krum's dark, gloomy appearance much. If anything, it had made him slightly craggier; he towered over Hermione and Ginny, glowering down at them from under beetling black eyebrows. "Herm-my-own-ninny," he said again, "I vont to talk to you." He glanced significantly at Ginny. "Alone."

Ginny looked at Hermione, who looked back at her in surprise. "I'm not going off and leaving Hermione here!" said Ginny indignantly. "She won't be able to get back on her own!"

But Viktor was still looking at Hermione. "Please," he said. "Just five minutes. In there." He jerked his head to the side, indicating a smaller room off the main one.

Hermione looked at Ginny, then shrugged. "All right. Five minutes," she said. "Ginny, if you don't mind waiting here..."

Ginny shook her head. "Of course not."

She watched as the towering Krum shepherded the much smaller figure of Hermione through the far exit, and closed the door behind

them, and shook her head. She didn't know what Krum wanted to say to Hermione, but from his expression, it was hardly good news. In her opinion, Hermione never should have agreed to meet him, he hardly seemed trustworthy and then there was Harry to consider. If Harry was *her* boyfriend, Ginny thought she would never... *no*, she told herself, squelch that thought! Never going to happen.

The far door opened and Hermione came out, looking flustered. She came up to Ginny and took her hands. Ginny nearly cried out; Hermione's hands were freezing cold. "Ginny," she said, "I've got to stay here and talk to Viktor. You go ahead and meet Ron. Viktor can drop me off at the Burrow later."

Astonished, Ginny goggled at her. "Are you *sure*?"

"Yes," said Hermione, very firmly.

"But Hermione," said Ginny, dropping her voice, "I don't feel right just leaving you here. Can't he...can't he come back to the Burrow with us and you can talk there?"

Hermione shook her head. "You'll understand later, Ginny," she said, and as Ginny still looked doubtful, added irritably, "I know what I'm doing, all right?"

Ginny stared as Hermione turned on her heel, walked away, and disappeared into the room where Viktor was, closing the door behind her. Feeling slightly dazed, Ginny turned and walked out of the Leaky Cauldron into the bright daylight of Diagon Alley.

Out of a dream of blood and fire, Draco awoke to find himself being shaken, hard, by the shoulder. He blinked, trying to see in the darkness. "Potter?" he croaked. "Ow! What are you *doing* -?"

And broke off. For the eyes staring at him out of the darkness were not green, but dark red, veined with yellow.

Draco yelled. And threw himself sideways off the bed, rolling across

the floor. He fetched up against the side of his trunk and scrambled to his knees, staring. It was nearly pitch black in the room, but he could see the hunched shape of something, something the size of a dog, crouching at the foot of his bed, glaring at him out of vicious-looking red eyes.

In the other bed, Harry bolted up and reached for his glasses.
"Malfoy, what-"

He broke off. Draco wasn't sure if Harry had seen the dark shape, and didn't much care either. Still on his knees, he fumbled for the lid of his trunk and wrenched it open. He plunged his hand inside, and then remembered, with a sickening lurch in his stomach, that he had given his sword to Lupin that afternoon. His wand, where was his wand-

"*Lumos*," said Harry.

Light blossomed out of the tip of the wand Harry was holding, and lit the room with a bluish glow. It illuminated Harry, sitting up in bed, Draco, crouched on the floor, and the creature, whatever it was, which gave a shrill scream and cowered away from the light.

"Don't hurt me!" it shouted, in perfectly recognizable English, although its voice sounded less like a human voice and more like a bonfire crackling words. "Please don't hurt me!"

Harry looked at Draco. Draco looked back. Neither of them spoke, but they were both obviously thinking the same thing: it couldn't be *that* horrible a monster if it was afraid of two boys in pajamas.

"What is it?" said Draco, looking at Harry in astonishment.

"No idea," replied Harry, getting out of bed. Draco got to his feet and stood next to Harry as they both stared, Harry holding his wand ready.

The whatever-it-was was about the size of a dog, with gray, scaled skin and a perfectly round, earless head. It had no nose either, and its mouth was a long slit. It was holding up two gray, long-fingered

hands in entreaty.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "We won't hurt you. Just...calm down."

"The hell we won't," said Draco, who was still very shaken. "What d'you mean jumping on me in the middle of the night like that? What do you want?"

The creature said, in the same crackling voice, "Hurt me if you will. I have come here only for what is mine."

Harry and Draco looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Come again?" said Harry politely.

"I have come for what is mine," repeated the creature. "My other *half!*" It fetched up a dry sob and looked pitifully at Draco and Harry. "For many years, it was hidden from me. And then I began to sense it had returned to the world. I sought it over land and ocean. And found it here. It is mine!" screamed the creature, "and it has been lost these thousand years!"

"What is it, exactly, this other half of yours?" asked Draco. "I mean, you look pretty complete to me, not missing any bits or parts, unless you count that you don't have any ears, I suppose. Is it an ear you're looking for?"

The creature glared at him with contempt. "You are a very stupid mortal boy," it said, "and if I had my other half and my full powers, I would eat you."

Draco looked furious. Harry put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Nobody's eating anyone here," he said. "Can you tell us a bit more about this, um, other half that you've misplaced?"

The creature looked livid. "I did not misplace it! It was taken from me by force by an evil wizard, and hidden from me; I have sought everywhere and it is *HERE!*"

Harry was looking at the creature with his head cocked thoughtfully to one side. "You're a demon, aren't you?"

The creature looked shifty. "I am not," it said.

"Oh, yes you are," said Harry, gaining conviction. "We did demons last year in Defense Against the Dark Arts. I know how to banish them, too." He pointed at the creature with his hand. "*Dispelle*-"

"Nooooo!" the demon shouted, banging its fists into Draco's pillow like an angry toddler, and Harry broke off. "I tell you, it is mine! You have no right to keep it from me! Thousands of years I have searched--"

"Well, did you try looking under the sofa in HELL?" yelled Draco, who was looking fed up.

The demon made a low, mournful, growling noise. "I do not search as you mortals might," it said. "I sense what is mine; it calls out to me and I hear it. For a thousand years it has been silent. Then, again, I heard the call and was summoned. And now--" It broke off, and looked around fretfully. "Now it is silent again. But it was here, I am sure of it!"

Harry looked sideways at Draco. "You do know what it's looking for, don't you?" he whispered. "That *sword*--"

"Shush!" said Draco warningly, and turned back to the demon. "There are no otherworldly or demonic objects in this room," he told it, which was true enough. "Unless you count Potter, I've always had my suspicions about him, but you're welcome to him if you want him."

The demon glanced at Harry without much interest. "The Potter boy is of no concern to me," he said.

"Hey!" yelled Harry, who was used to being the focal point of world events, and felt slighted. "Look," he said to the demon, "go on and have a look if you don't believe Draco that we haven't got any, um, demonic objects in here. You haven't, have you?" he hissed in

Draco's ear.

Draco rolled his eyes.

But the demon, not waiting for further permission, had begun tearing through the room, overturning chairs, raking through the ashes in the fireplace, and ripping apart both boys' school bags before turning on Harry's trunk. Harry watched in shock while his personal possessions flew everywhere. Draco ducked as Harry's clothes flew over his head and hit the opposite wall.

Finding nothing in Harry's trunk, the demon turned its attention to Draco's, and repeated the exercise of tearing it apart. Both boys watching in resignation as it scattered Draco's clothes and books all over the floor. "You know," said Draco to Harry in an undertone, "I always figured demons for more of the attacking, mauling and killing type. This going through our stuff thing...it's sort of...tacky."

"I really agree," said Harry.

"You could banish it," said Draco hopefully.

"I think it's probably better to convince it we haven't got the thing, otherwise it'll just come back," said Harry. "It doesn't seem to be able to sense where it's 'other half' is any more. I hope," he added, thinking of Lupin.

"Fine," said Draco. "But if it tears up any of my clothes, it's out of here."

"This is all your fault," said Ron, glaring at Ginny across the table. His blue eyes were blazing, and his red hair was sticking up in wild tufts just like Harry's. "How could you just leave her in the Leaky Cauldron with that-- that--"

"That is not fair!" Ginny yelled back, her eyes flashing. "You didn't hear her, Ron! You weren't there! She wouldn't have let me stay, she as much as told me to go away and leave her alone!"

"It's midnight!" said Ron, who was looking both very angry and very worried. "Where *is* she?"

"I know," said Ginny, sitting down unhappily at the kitchen table, "I know, but Ron, please try to have some perspective. Maybe they just got to talking and lost track of time."

"She'd have sent an owl, or something. Hermione's not like that, she's--"

"Not like what?" said Hermione, coming in through the screen door and regarding them both curiously.

Ron and Ginny gaped at her. "*Hermione*," breathed Ron in relief. "You're all right!"

"I told you she was fine," said Ginny, who was nevertheless extremely relieved to see her. She turned to Hermione. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm all right," said Hermione calmly. "Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I need to go upstairs for a moment. I'll be right back."

She turned, still very calm, and went up the stairs. Ron and Ginny watched her go with open mouths.

"Do you think she's upset about something?" asked Ginny, when she could find words.

"I don't think so," said Ron slowly, "She seems the opposite of upset. Weirdly calm. Maybe you should go up and talk to her," he added, unhappily. "Girl talk."

Ginny shook her head. "She'd be much more likely to talk to you."

Ron sighed. "I guess you're right," he said, stood up, and made his way towards the stairs, where he was stopped in his tracks by the sight of Hermione, who was coming towards him carrying her small

overnight bag. She walked right past him down the stairs and into the kitchen. Ron hurried after her.

"Hermione," he said, fighting a growing feeling of alarm, "are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," said Hermione, who was walking across the kitchen now. "I've just decided to spend a few days with Viktor, that's all."

"*What?*" exclaimed Ron and Ginny together.

"Hermione, you're not serious," said Ginny.

Hermione turned and looked at them. She looked small, pale and determined. Stray wisps of hair were coming out of her bun and curling around her face. "I am serious," she said. "Why shouldn't I go? Why shouldn't I do what I like?"

"Have you lost your mind?" said Ron.

"What about Harry?" protested Ginny.

Hermione shrugged. "He'll understand."

"He most decidedly will NOT understand," said Ron. "Hermione, sit down, please. Are you angry with Harry? Did he do something? Are you trying to get back at him? In which case, I beg you to get back at him some other way. Ginny, help me out."

"You could have an affair with Ron," suggested Ginny helpfully.

"That'd upset Harry."

"Thanks, Gin," said Ron, shooting her a look of death.

Hermione shook her head, looking at Ron with wide, slightly glassy brown eyes. "This has nothing to do with him," she said. "This is just something I have to do. Will you two calm down? I'll be back in a few days."

"A few...days?" said Ron faintly.

"Well, if you're just going to overreact like this, maybe I won't come back at all!" snapped Hermione, turned on her heel, and slammed open the screen door. She stalked outside. Ron and Ginny looked at each other in horror, then Ron leaped to his feet and followed Hermione out into the garden.

"Hermione!" he called. She was walking across the grass towards a tall, dark figure sitting astride a broomstick. With a feeling of intense foreboding, Ron broke into a run. "Hermione!" he called again, but without a backward glance, she climbed onto the broomstick, locked her arms around Krum's waist, Krum kicked off, and they were away, soaring into the air high above the Burrow. Ron threw his head back and watched as they shrank to a tiny speck over the treetops, and vanished.

"But Hermione *hates* to fly," he said numbly, still staring after them. "She won't even fly with Harry."

"Guess she rethought her position on that," said Ginny dryly, from behind him.

"Something here is very, very wrong," said Ron, turning to look at his sister. "Get Pigwidgeon," he said. "We've got to send a letter right away. We need to contact Mum and Dad-- -- and Hermione's parents--"

"I can't get Pigwidgeon," said Ginny.

Ron stared at her. "Why not?"

Her face was very pale in the moonlight as she returned his gaze with wide, unhappy eyes. "He's gone," she said. "I think Hermione sent him off already with a letter."

"Oh, God," said Ron, with finality. "*Harry*."

"I don't think we should tell him," said Draco in a hissing whisper. It

was eight in the morning, and they were standing outside Lupin's office door. Having found nothing, the demon had eventually left their dorm room at 3 a.m., vowing to return at some future point to retrieve its "other half." Neither Harry nor Draco had been able to get properly back to sleep afterwards; as a consequence, they were both very tired and jumpy.

"But he's a werewolf, Malfoy," protested Harry, running a hand through his hair, which was standing up wildly. "He's used to all this Dark Magic type stuff."

"That may be," said Draco, "but he's still a grown-up werewolf. A *teacher* werewolf. If we tell him there are demons in our bedroom, he'll feel morally bound to do something about it."

"We can't tell him there are demons in our bedroom anyway," said Harry. "We can tell him there was a demon in our bedroom. Just one."

"I think teachers are required to regard even one demon in the dormitory as an administrative problem," said Draco. "Ten to one he goes right to Dumbledore."

"So what if he does, Malfoy?" snapped Harry. "You're just afraid he'll take your toy sword away."

"We don't know that that's what it was looking for!"

"What the hell do you think it was after? Your socks? Your collection of hair care products? Oh, wait, it doesn't have any hair! You want to know why? Because it's a DEMON!"

"Don't yell in my ear," said Draco, looking irritable. "You want to tell him? Fine. You go ahead and tell him."

"All right," said Harry, feeling oddly deflated. "I will."

And he knocked on Lupin's office door, which swung open. Both boys went in, Draco following Harry.

Professor Lupin was sitting at his desk, reading the Daily Prophet. The cool morning sunlight filtering in through the window turned his hair to dark gold. He looked up as they came in and smiled, folding up the paper and shoving it into a drawer as he did so. "I was wondering if you were planning on coming in or if you were just going to stand outside the door and fight with each other all morning," he said.

Draco and Harry looked at each other with guilty horror.

"Oh, don't worry," said Lupin. "I didn't hear what you were saying." He glanced at Draco. "I'm glad you came by, actually, I--"

"Did you get a chance to look at my sword?" said Draco quickly.

"I did," said Lupin. He stood up and crossed the room to a glass case that was hanging on the wall. Harry saw that Lupin had placed Slytherin's sword inside it. He took the case down, and carried it over to his desk, where he laid it down and surveyed it calmly. "Draco," he said. "When the sword was in your family's possession, where was it kept?"

"In a glass case in our fencing room," said Draco promptly.

"And did anyone ever use it?"

"No," said Draco after a moment, "it was always in the case, no one ever opened it that I saw."

"Dumbledore told me that the case was shattered by a Whirlwind Charm produced by a demonic object of some sort," said Lupin, and Harry and Draco nodded. "A very odd combination of circumstances. I am fairly sure, though I have no proof, that that case your father kept it in was no ordinary one. For this is no ordinary sword."

"Well, of course not," said Harry. "Dumbledore told us it was a Magic sword."

"It's more than that," said Lupin, "This sword is what is known as a

demon blade. You can kill absolutely anything with it: demons, vampires, immortal monsters, even the risen dead."

"Great," said Draco. "That'll be a lot of fun at parties. 'Hi, my name is Draco Malfoy and I can kill absolutely anything, what can YOU do?'"

"You will not be taking this sword to parties," said Lupin severely. "In fact, you won't be touching it again for a while."

Draco looked at Harry as if to say *I told you so*. "But it's mine!" he objected, turning back to Lupin. "It's been in my family forever!"

"When I say that it is a demon blade," said Lupin, "I don't meant that it is a sword made by a demon, or for a demon. I mean that it is a demon. This sword is very alive. It is also very evil."

Draco had his arms crossed over his chest and was glaring at Lupin. "How do you know it's evil?"

"I don't," Lupin admitted, "I'll need to learn more about it, perform more tests --" He broke off. "I'm sorry, Draco. I'll need to keep it at least until I'm done conducting the tests."

"And is it less evil if you keep it in your office?" asked Draco, biting his lip.

"It's not the fact that it's in my office," said Lupin. "It's the fact that's in this case. I might be mistaken, but I would imagine your father kept it in a case much like this one." Draco and Harry both glanced askance at the case, which looked to them like ordinary glass. "It's *not* glass," said Lupin, correctly interpreting their glances. "It's adamantine. A material that resists most types of magical interference *and*," he added, looking at Draco, "is very nearly unbreakable. Perhaps another very strong Whirlwind Charm might smash it, but I wouldn't recommend attempting it."

"In other words, no point in my trying to steal it back," said Draco, with a crooked sort of grin. "Even if I used a Summoning Charm?"

"No point at all," said Lupin cheerfully. "The sword can't be magically located while it's in the case."

Draco and Harry looked at each other. No wonder the demon hadn't been able to find it.

"You'll get it back when I'm sure it isn't dangerous," Lupin said to Draco, and turned to Harry. "Now, did you have something you wanted to tell me, Harry?"

Harry glanced from Lupin, who was looking gently inquiring, to Draco, who was staring angrily off out the window. Harry knew that if he so much as mentioned that a somewhat hysterical demon had showed up in their room the previous night, claiming that it was looking for its "other half"--which Harry now had no doubt whatsoever was Slytherin's sword--that Draco would never see that sword again.

Harry shook his head. "No, Professor Lupin. Nothing."

"Oooh," said Draco, as they left Lupin's office and headed off down the hall, "You lied to a teacher, Potter. And with a totally straight face, too. Pretty soon you'll be turning into me."

"Been there," said Harry. "Done that."

Draco grinned at him. "Come on, you liked it, admit it--" and broke off, as a tiny owl swooped low over his head, twittering madly.

"Hey!" said Harry, craning his head to look up. "Pigwidgeon!" He held out a hand, and Pigwidgeon landed in it, hooting tiredly. "Poor Pig," said Harry, "back and forth from Ireland twice in two days. D'you have a letter for me?"

Pigwidgeon stuck out his leg, on which was tied a curl of white paper fastened with a red ribbon. Harry took the letter and released Pig, who flew up and sat on his shoulder.

Draco was looking at him curiously. Harry wondered if he was bothered that Hermione hadn't sent along a letter for him as well. Admittedly it wasn't like her. She must have had something on her mind.

Harry tore the letter open, started to read, and went suddenly very white.

Draco looked at him curiously. "Everything all right, Potter?"

"It's--it's from Hermione," said Harry.

"I know," said Draco, his eyes betraying a flicker of alarm. "Did something happen to her?"

"She's fine," said Harry in an oddly strangled voice. "She's... fine."

"Then what's wrong?"

"She's gone off to spend the summer with Viktor Krum," said Harry blankly, still staring at the letter. "In Bulgaria. She says she realizes she's really loved him all these years." He looked up at Draco with the expression of someone caught in a horrible dream. "She's ... she's breaking up with me."

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References: "Well, did you try looking under the sofa in HELL?" — Buffy.

Draco Sinister

## Chapter Two - Ink, Blood & Brotherhood

\*\*\*\*\*

She's breaking up with me," said Harry.

"She's what?"

"Breaking up with me," said Harry again, still with the same look of utter, blank astonishment.

"She's not," said Draco, with conviction. "You're reading the letter wrong. Give it to me."

It was doubtless a mark of how very shocked Harry was that he did so, holding it out mutely for Draco to take. Draco snatched it, and read it quickly.

*Dear Harry,*

*I saw Viktor this afternoon, and realized that I have really loved him all these years and still do. I am going with him to his home in Bulgaria where we can be together. You will always be a dear friend of mine, but I have realized that my heart belongs to Viktor alone. Please don't try to contact me.*

*Hermione*

"Not a lot of room for interpretation there," said Harry in a doom-laden sort of voice. "Pretty straightforward."

"She can't be in love with Viktor Krum, she just can't be," protested Draco, scanning the letter again in an attempt to find some other analysis of Hermione's short missive. "I mean, I always figured if she left you, it would be for me. Sorry," he added, looking up at Harry.

"But, really. Viktor Krum?"

Harry just looked at him blankly. "Why not Viktor Krum?"

"Because he's a big stupid Neanderthal who can't even pronounce her name!"

"It doesn't matter," said Harry hollowly. "She doesn't love me. That's what matters." He took the letter back from Draco, looked at it as if it were a weird foreign object, and stuffed it in his pocket. "I guess we'd better go to class."

"What?"

"Class," said Harry. "We've got Lupin's class at nine."

"You mean you're just going to go to class, as if...as if nothing..."

But Harry had already turned around and was wandering off down the hallway. Draco stared after him in disbelief. He couldn't quite understand why Harry was acting like he'd just been given the Dementor's Kiss. If it had been him, he'd be yelling and throwing heavy objects. Maybe Harry was in shock? Draco had read about people being in shock. You were supposed to make them lie down and cover them with a heavy blanket. However, knocking Harry down in the hallway and throwing a blanket on him seemed unfeasible.

"Ello, Draco!" said a voice at his elbow.

Fleur. Just who he didn't want to see.

"Fleur, I've got to get to class right now..."

"You 'ave class with Lupin, am I correct? I 'ave the same class. We can go together!" she announced brightly, and took his arm as he started walking. Draco picked up his pace until he was walking alongside Harry, who was still looking expressionless.

""Ello, 'Arry!" chirped Fleur.

Harry said nothing.

"Is 'Arry all right?" she said in an undertone to Draco.

He was spared replying as she spotted Professor Lupin coming around a bend in the hallway up ahead. He nodded a greeting as his eyes fell on them, then ducked into the classroom.

"Now 'e is very good-looking," said Fleur complacently. "Not like those other professors. This one, 'e 'as..."

"Animal magnetism?" suggested Draco.

"Yes," said Fleur, and smiled.

Draco was relieved when she let go of his arm and dashed into the classroom after Lupin. He turned quickly to Harry. "Potter, are you sure..."

"I'm *fine*, Malfoy."

Draco wanted to tell Harry that he didn't look fine. He looked as if he were going to be sick, as a matter of fact. But there was no opportunity. Students had begun pouring into the classroom, and Harry went with them. Draco followed Harry, and sat down where he could keep an eye on him. He wasn't sure what this weird calm of Harry's betokened, but was sure it wasn't good.

Draco himself felt fairly stunned. Hermione, running off with Viktor Krum? Being in love with Viktor Krum? It was about as in character for her as forgetting to study for final exams. Nobody knew Hermione like he did, watched her like he did, saw the way she looked at Harry like he did. So many times watching her watching Harry....she couldn't possibly not be in love with Harry after all. His world might be built on some strange foundations, Draco thought grimly, but dammit they were foundations, and if Hermione ran off with Viktor Krum then it all came crashing down. What the hell was she thinking?

"...very pleased to be teaching this class." Professor Lupin's voice broke in on Draco's thoughts, and he glanced up. Lupin was standing behind his desk, on which sat a large glass globe and a stack of books. He had just finished writing the title of the class on the board: FUNDAMENTALS OF MAGICAL TRANSFORMATION FOR MAGIDS.

Fleur was sitting in the front row, staring fixedly at Lupin. Draco began to wonder what might happen if Lupin noticed. Fleur's direct stare had a tendency to cause males of almost any age to begin acting in an eccentric manner.

"Now," Lupin went on, "you all know that as Magids, you have access to abilities that other wizards do not. Whether you choose to learn to utilize these powers to their fullest is up to you, but you all have the potential. First, however, you must learn what these abilities are."

He turned again, and wrote another word on the board: TELEPATHIC MAGIC.

A faint whisper of surprise ran around the classroom. Reflexively, Draco turned and looked at Harry, who was staring fixedly at his quill as if it held all the secrets of the universe, and didn't appear to have heard a word that Lupin had said.

"It used to be called the Art of Voiceless Speaking," Lupin went on, "but for many years, it's been considered a myth. For a Magid, however..."

Draco stopped listening to Lupin; he was looking at Harry again. Harry was still staring at his quill with a blank expression. Draco leaned sideways towards him and said, out of the side of his mouth, "I was just thinking about this Hermione thing, Potter, and I--"

*Bang!*

The glass bottle of ink on Harry's desk exploded like a miniature bomb. Glass and ink flew in every direction, splattering and astonishing Harry's desk and clothes. Draco touched his hand to his face and it came away black and red: ink and blood. A flying shard of glass had cut his cheek.

Some of the people sitting near Harry and Draco started to mutter in surprise. Ignoring them, Draco looked at Harry with sudden alarm. Harry wasn't any good at controlling his emotions, in fact he was terrible at it, and if the shock was starting to wear off, then...

*BANG!*

The glass globe on Lupin's desk blew apart. Lupin jumped back, and several students ducked as fair-sized shards of glass flew over their heads and shattered against the opposite wall. Draco jumped to his feet and grabbed the back of Harry's robes. "Come on, Potter," he said.

"But I didn't--"

"Come on!"

Half-dragging Harry, Draco backed out of the classroom as Lupin and the rest of the class stared at them in astonishment. Once out in the hallway, he kicked the classroom door shut and let go of Harry, who sat down hard on the floor and looked up at him with a dazed expression.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Potter?" yelled Draco, fuming. He was covered in ink and bits of glass, and was fairly sure that his shirt was permanently ruined. "Get a grip on yourself!"

"I'm not doing anything!" Harry yelled back furiously.

*CRASH!*



One of the stained-glass windows set high in the wall above their heads shattered, raining down bright bits of glass.

"Stop it!" shouted Draco, covering his head. "D'you want to bring the whole school down around our ears, you stupid prat?"

Now Harry was starting to look worried. "But I don't mean to be--" He broke off as a large, ominous crack appeared in another window.

Draco was now seriously alarmed. Given Harry's already-proven abilities to conjure up hailstorms of owls and blue snow, he was afraid it might at any moment start raining toads. Or bricks. Or sharp, pointy objects.

"Potter," he said,. "I want you to know something. Ultimately, this is for your own good."

"What is?" said Harry, looking at him in bewilderment.

"This," said Draco, and kicked Harry, hard, in the ribs.

"*Uck!*" said Harry, or something very like, doubling up and gasping. When he got his breath back, he looked up at Draco in fury. "You asshole, Malfoy," he said, got to his feet, and punched Draco in the eye.

It was not in Draco's nature to take a pummeling without fighting back. He swung at Harry and hit him in the jaw. It was ultimately, however, a losing proposition; Draco was taller and had the greater reach, but Harry had the strength born from blind fury-not just at Draco, but at life in general. By the time Lupin and the rest of the class had poured out of the room to see what was going on, Harry was sitting on top of Draco and hitting him with both fists.

"Arry!" squealed Fleur, who didn't like to see boys fighting unless it was over her. "You will not 'it Draco! You will ruin 'is face!"

"HARRY!" bellowed Lupin, his voice dripping icicles. "DRACO. YOU WILL EXPLAIN YOURSELVES."

Harry stopped hitting Draco and stared from him to Lupin, looking dazed.

"IN MY OFFICE NOW!" said Lupin.

Harry got up, and so did Draco. Both of them were bleeding, although Draco looked a deal worse than Harry. They reluctantly followed Lupin down the hall to his office, aware of the curious stares of the other students at their backs. Lupin yanked the door of his office open, ushered them inside, hissed "SIT DOWN AND DON'T MOVE UNTIL I GET BACK," and slammed the door.

It was suddenly very quiet, except for the gentle ticking of the clock on the office wall. Draco looked at Harry out of the corner of his eye. Harry looked at Draco out of the corner of his eye. And saw that he was grinning.

"What's funny, Malfoy?" he said with a mixture of curiosity and indignation.

"Kept you from burying us all in a mountain of shrapnel, didn't I?" said Draco, who could only grin out of one side of his mouth, which gave him a lopsided and vaguely psychotic air. "Distracted you at the crucial moment. Feel better now?"

Harry, who did indeed feel better, looked down at his bleeding knuckles, then back up at Draco, and felt also suddenly guilty. "Malfoy," he said haltingly, "I'm really, really sorry that I-"

"Forget it!" said Draco cheerfully. "The look on your face when I kicked you in the ribs, that was so worth it!"

Harry's feeling of guilt vanished. "There's just no point apologizing to you, is there?"

Draco waved a dismissive hand. "I don't ever apologize, why should you?"

"You don't apologize? Like you don't faint?"

"Right," said Draco.

"What else don't you do?"

"I don't cry," said Draco. "And I don't dance. Hate dancing." He shuddered. "And I don't think Hermione's in love with Viktor Krum, either."

Harry winced. "Can we not talk about that?"

"Come on, Potter!" said Draco, who had wandered over to Lupin's desk and was casually examining the objects that lay on it. "Think about it. It makes no sense--" He broke off. "Hey, Potter, look at this."

Harry came over to see what Draco was looking at, and glanced over his shoulder. A large and rather musty-looking book sat open on Lupin's desk. Harry touched it gingerly; it had a thick leathery cover and the pages were old, yellowed and powdery. The book was open to a page which showed woodcut illustrations of various objects --- something that looked like a gauntlet, then a rather nasty-looking skull, and underneath both those things, a drawing of a sword. It wasn't detailed, but the jewels in the hilt were very definitely green.

The heading across the top of the page read: Daemonic Artifacts: A User's Guide. The Living Blade. The writing beneath that was very hard to read, being splotched with bits of candle-wax and the occasional suspicious-looking brown stain.

*...For which this blade was at one time or still is, any part or partition of the body or spirit of a demon... whosoever possesses such a blade must know its nature. Such a blade can be borne; but at great cost to the bearer, whether that cost be of body, or of soul in the nature of an Exchange. Whosoever comes across such an object must know that it is a Talisman of Purest Evil, and should only be dealt with in a manner pursuant to its destruction.*

"Purest Evil," said Harry thoughtfully. "That sounds bad."

"What sounds bad is that he's going to destroy my sword," said Draco, looking furious. "I never should have lent it to him...what was I thinking?"

"You don't know he's going to destroy your sword," said Harry reasonably. "It might not be one of these...Living Blade things."

Draco looked at Harry. Harry looked sheepish. "Okay, okay. It probably is. But if it's a Talisman of Purest Evil, do you really want to keep it?"

"Hell, yes," said Draco.

Harry shook his head. "I do not understand you, Malfoy."

The office door opened, and they both jumped back several feet. It was Lupin of course, looking very grave. He came into the office, shut the door behind him, and sat down behind his desk. He looked from Harry--who was cowering against one wall--to Draco, who was cowering against the wall opposite, and said, "I'm sorry I shouted at you. You...alarmed me. I'm not much of a fan of physical violence, and Harry, I rather thought you weren't either."

"Oh, he's not usually," said Draco cheerfully. "But Hermione stomped all over his heart with hobnailed boots, so he's a bit edgy."

"*Hermione..?*" Lupin echoed, looking astounded. Harry, who had gone red, scowled and said nothing. "All right," said Lupin. "Never mind. I've always thought it was unfortunate," he added, "that one's Magid powers, which are so closely tuned to both one's wizarding skills and one's control over emotions, tend to kick in right around adolescence, when one had very little of either. Harry, stop scowling. I'm sure Hermione would never, er, do anything to..." He trailed off. "All right, that's none of my business. But if you're really upset, Harry, maybe you should talk to Sirius?"

"Oh," said Harry. "No. I don't think so."

"Actually, that's not that bad of an idea," said Draco. "He could beat up Viktor Krum for you, Potter."

"Viktor Krum?" repeated Lupin, raising his eyebrows.

"Hermione went to Bulgaria with Viktor Krum last night," said Draco, who seemed determined to act as Greek Chorus. "And she wrote Harry a letter, but I've been telling him I don't think she meant it, because I mean if you've ever seen pictures of Krum he's only got one eyebrow and Potter here might not be winning any beauty competitions, but--"

"That's impossible!" said Lupin, who was looking both exasperated and amused.

"It isn't," said Draco. "He really only has the one eyebrow."

"I meant," said Lupin, "that Hermione er, running off with Viktor Krum to Bulgaria is impossible."

Harry looked startled. "Why do you say that?"

"Because," said Lupin, "Viktor Krum is in London. He led the Bulgarian Quidditch team to a stunning victory against Switzerland just this morning. I heard a play-by-play on the Wizarding Wireless. He is most definitely," Lupin added, "and certainly, NOT in Bulgaria."

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"Percy, come on," said Ron, exasperated. "Can't you be helpful, just this once?"

"Percy, please," added Ginny, looking entreatingly at her older brother, or at least all of him that was visible -- which was his head, floating in the fireplace. Ron and Ginny were kneeling in front of the fireplace, trying very hard not to cough from the soot.

"No," said Percy firmly, looking very cross. "I am NOT going to give you Viktor Krum's home address in Bulgaria. Do you know what

kind of trouble I could get into with the Department of Magical Games and Sports?"

"We're not going to track him down and slaughter him, Perce," said Ron irritably. "We just want to send a letter to Hermione, see if she's all right."

Percy made an irritated noise. "Look, Ron, I'm sorry your girlfriend ran off with Viktor Krum, but he is very famous and rich and you really can't blame her. Just try to be a good sport about it, who don't you?"

"Hermione is *not my girlfriend*," said Ron, through gritted teeth. "She is *Harry's girlfriend*."

"Well," said Percy, in a patronizing tone, "She's Viktor's girlfriend now, isn't she?"

"That's just it!" said Ron, pouncing on this statement like Pigwidgeon onto a tasty mouse. "I don't think she is, at least not voluntarily. I think," he said, dropping his voice, "that she was under some sort of Hex...or a love potion!"

"Ron!" Percy exclaimed, horrified. "Use of love potions is completely illegal, you know that! Viktor Krum would never do that, he's...he's...a famous international figure!"

"So is Voldemort," said Ginny crankily.

Percy and Ron turned on her. "Don't say the name!"

"Why not? Harry does."

"You're not Harry!" said Ron, unhelpfully, and turned back to Percy. "Percy, just because he's a famous Quidditch player, that doesn't mean anything. He was just obsessed with Hermione two years ago, it was really disgusting, he's so much older than her--"

"Ron!" Percy interrupted. "Do you have any idea how busy I am right now? The Ministry is in an uproar! There's chaos in the streets!

This morning Minister Fudge got five hundred owls! Five hundred! And guess who has to answer them all? Me!"

Ron and Ginny stared at each other, then back at Percy. "Five hundred owls?" said Ron in surprise. "Why? What's going on?"

Percy turned an apoplectic shade of purple. "Don't you even read the paper anymore?" he shouted.

"We were too worried about Hermione," said Ginny, looking startled.

"Well, go read it!" snapped Percy. "And don't bother me again until you have!"

And he vanished.

Ginny and Ron stared at each other, then got to their feet. Without speaking, Ginny went to the front door, collected the Daily Prophet, and brought it inside, where she spread it out on the kitchen table. "Oh," she said faintly, catching sight of the headline, "Ron..."

Ron crossed the room to stand next to her and looked down at the front page of the paper, which read, in huge letters:

DEMENTORS ABANDON AZKABAN.

The Ministry of Magic has confirmed at this time that the Dementors, longtime guards of wizard prison Azkaban, have abandoned their posts as the protectors of the over two hundred prisoners that Azkaban currently holds. There is no word as to where they might have gone, according to Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic. "It appears that they simply vanished. We have no idea where they have gone; however, no prisoners have escaped and the Dementors have been replaced by fully trained and qualified wizards from the Agency for Magical Law Enforcement." Fudge stressed that the magical community should remain calm; all prisoners remain safely in Azkaban and there have been no reported escapes. "We've been discussing the matter of replacing the Dementors with qualified wizards for a long time now within the Ministry," adds Percy Weasley, Assistant to the Minister of Magic.

"Really, this is all for the best as it gives us an opportunity to implement our new program."

"Percy, you git," said Ron, under his breath. "How is this a good thing? Dementors running rampant over the countryside..."

"But they're not," said Ginny. "It says they've just vanished."

Ron was biting his knuckle thoughtfully. "Like Hermione," he said.

"You don't honestly think those two things are related, do you? Or do you think they all ran off with Viktor Krum?"

"Well, no obviously, but if there's one thing I've learned being friends with Harry all these years, it's that when weird things start happening all at the same time, they're usually connected. That, and a big spider is nobody's friend."

Ginny shook her head, staring anxiously out at the Pigwidgeon-free sky. "I just wish we would hear from Harry," she said fretfully. "I want to know what she told him."

Ron looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "If she did really break up with Harry," he said slowly, "would you be all that upset?"

Ginny didn't answer.

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"If you keep pacing like that, Potter," said Draco, not opening his eyes, "I will nail your feet to the floor. And don't think I won't."

Harry whirled and glared at Draco, who was lying on his bed, fully-dressed, in the position in which he normally slept - on his back, with his arms crossed over his chest. "How can you sleep like that?" Harry demanded, sounding aggrieved. "You sleep like a vampire bat. It's...unnatural."

"My mum used to say I slept like a little baby angel," said Draco, unfazed.



Harry commenced pacing again. He had been pacing up and down the room since they had left Lupin's office, and it was now five o'clock in the afternoon. Draco sighed, sat up, and unfolded his arms. He hadn't really wanted to go to sleep anyway, he was frankly afraid that if he did, he would have another nightmare. "Potter..."

"I just can't believe I haven't heard from Ron yet. I mean, she was staying with them at the Burrow, if she's gone off somewhere then he must know about it..."

"Well, that was his owl he sent this morning, maybe he hasn't got another?"

Harry sighed and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "It's possible, I guess." He looked up at Draco. "You know what? You're right. Pacing is stupid. I'm not gonna pace any more."

"Good," said Draco, in relief.

"I'm going to fly to the Burrow instead."

"What? That's the most ridiculous-" Draco broke off. "Actually," he said grudgingly, "that makes a lot of sense. We can't be more than what, four hours from there by broomstick? If we leave now, we can be there at nine, and back here for breakfast. It's a lot better than waiting around for some stupid owl."

Harry was looking at him with a half-smile. "We?"

"I'm going with you," said Draco, standing up, and pulling his black travelling cloak out of his trunk.

Harry reached for his own cloak. "Is this the part where you tell me that we're a team now?"

"No," said Draco, straightening up. "This is the part where I tell you that if you don't bring me with you I'll go right to Lupin and tell him you've flown to England, and when you get back, they'll expell you."

Harry reached for his broom. "You wouldn't tell on me, would you, Malfoy?"

"I have made a long and brilliant career out of telling on you, Potter. Don't' think I'm going to stop now."

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When she heard the knock on the door, Ginny ran to answer it, half-hoping it would be Hermione, having seen sense and returned to the Burrow.

But it wasn't Hermione.

She recognized the person at the door immediately. Hating someone as much as she hated him had branded a certain image of him into her mind. He looked different than he had a year ago - taller, much browner, and if possible, even blonder - but it was definitely Draco Malfoy, wearing a black travelling cloak and carrying a broomstick in one hand.

"Hallo," he said, looking at her as if he didn't quite remember who she was. "It's Ginny, right? Is your brother home?"

She shut the door in his face and stood there, glaring at it.

There was a moment of stunned silence from the other side of the door. Then another voice spoke, a very familiar voice, causing Ginny to jump.

"Gin," said Harry's voice cautiously, "It's me. I'm, um, out here with Malfoy. Would you mind letting us in?"

If Harry had asked Ginny to set the house on fire, she probably would have done it. She opened the door and looked mistrustfully at the two boys standing on the doorstep - Draco, looking startled, and Harry - tired and pale but so familiarly Harry, with the same green eyes and untidy hair and lightning-bolt scar. He was taller, too, and he was holding his Firebolt in one hand.

"It's good to see you, Ginny," he said, although he looked a little wary. "Everything all right?"

Ginny felt her lip trembling. "Harry," she said. "Oh, Harry. We've been so worried. Hermione -"

Ron appeared behind Ginny, saw Harry, and then saw Draco. He didn't smile, but said, "You two had better come in."

Draco looked at Harry, who was looking startled at this unusually cold reception. Harry shrugged, and they both stepped over the threshold and followed Ron and Ginny into the kitchen.

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"I bet you must have passed the owl we sent in midair on your way here," said Ron. All four of them were sitting around the Weasley's kitchen table, drinking tea. Draco was also methodically working his way through a jar of peanuts. Harry, who wasn't hungry, had just finished exchanging information with Ron and Ginny regarding the events of the past two days, from the news in the Daily Prophet to the contents of Hermione's letter to Harry. "Pig was too tired to go all the way back to Ireland again, so we had to get a municipal owl from the post office in town."

Harry barely appeared to hear this; he seemed lost in thought. "So, when she left...she seemed odd to you?"

"I told you that already," said Ron with a hint of impatience. "I mean, besides the sizeable weirdness involved in her going off with Krum in the first place yes, she seemed odd."

"I think he used a love potion on her," said Ginny firmly. "I know they're illegal, but he's got a lot of money and knows a lot of people, I bet he could get hold of one."

"But if all he was trying to do was get her to fall in love with him, then what's all this misdirection stuff about them going to Bulgaria, when he's right there in London? And if he's in London, then where is Hermione?" said Draco.

"Maybe she doesn't want us to know where she is," said Harry.  
"Maybe she wants us to leave her alone."

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Draco. "Look, if she's really been in love with Krum all this time, then-" He broke off. He had been about to say "then she would have seen Krum in the mirror of Erised and not you," but he didn't know if Ron and Ginny knew about the mirror, and it was rather personal to Harry. Odd to know something about Harry that they didn't. "Well, then, why didn't she stay with him in Bulgaria when she had the chance two years ago? Instead of having Ron come and retrieve her? She couldn't have been having that great of a time."

"She was only fourteen then," said Harry quietly.

"Why is it," said Draco, his voice rising impatiently, "that out of all of us, YOU are the only one who seems prepared to believe that she left here of her own free will?"

"I don't," said Harry irritably. "I'm just don't think that haring after Viktor Krum in a mad jealous rage is going to -"

"Haring after Viktor Krum in a mad jealous rage is exactly what you should be doing!" retorted Draco. "The question remains: did she or did she not run off with Krum? And who's going to know the answer to that better than the Man Himself? I suggest we find him, posthaste, and ask politely. And if that doesn't work, we'll hold him down and threaten to shave off his eyebrow."

Ron cleared his throat. "I agree with Malfoy," he said, looking slightly sick to his stomach, as if the words "I agree with Malfoy" agreed with him about as much as a double helping of Cockroach Clusters. "When we read in the paper that Viktor Krum was in London after all, we got right back in touch with Percy and he told us that all the international Quidditch players are staying at the World Quidditch Club off Diagon Alley. I think we should go there and talk to him -"

"I've been there," said Draco. "With my father. There's a lot of

security, I mean those Quidditch stars, they're real celebrities. We can't just stroll in."

"Well, I thought I could pretend to be Percy," said Ron hopefully. "I mean, we do look a bit alike, and I could say I'm Percy Weasley and I need to see Viktor Krum -"

"Why?" interrupted Draco. He was looking at Ron with narrowed gray eyes. "Why do you need to see Viktor Krum?"

"Well," said Ron, "I hadn't worked that bit out yet, but -"

"This," said Draco, "is why you should let *me* do the planning."

"You?" said Ron, standing up and glaring at him.

"*I'm* the one in Slytherin," said Draco coolly, standing up as well and returning the glare. "*I'm* the shrewd, underhanded one. I come up with the cunning plans around here, not you. You wouldn't know a cunning plan if it painted itself blue and danced naked on a harpsichord singing 'Cunning plans are here again!'"

"That is not true!" yelled Ron, losing his head somewhat. "I have come up with very cunning plans!"

"You're in *Gryffindor*!" sneered Draco. "Your idea of a cunning plan is 'Everybody on the count of three!'"

Ron lunged at Draco - just as Harry stepped between them. Ron collided with Harry, knocking him into the stove and bruising his own elbow in the process. A number of pots and pans clattered to the floor, and the mirror that hung over the stove shouted "*Watch what you're doing, clumsy!*"

Ron rubbed his bruised elbow. "Damn it, Harry," he said wrathfully. "Why'd you do that?"

Harry stood up, looking furious. "All right, Ron. We need to talk. Outside. Now."

Still rubbing his elbow, Ron followed Harry out into the dark garden, leaving Ginny and Draco standing alone in the kitchen, looking nonplussed. Harry and Ron had walked about ten feet from the house when Harry whirled around and said angrily, "What the hell is up with you, Ron, letting Malfoy get to you like that? You know he's just trying to annoy you! He probably doesn't even have a plan!"

"What the hell is up with me?" Ron demanded. Usually when he was angry he flushed as red as his hair, but he seemed to have passed beyond mere anger into a livid state of fury in which each freckle stood out on his white face like an inkblot. "What the hell is up with you, Harry? Did I give you permission to bring Malfoy to my house? Did I? You know what his father did to my father! You know how my family feels about the Malfoys! What do you think my parents would say if they knew he was here?"

Some of the color had drained out of Harry's face. "Ron, I didn't think--"

"Yeah, that's just it, you didn't think! You don't ever think any more! What's happened to you, Harry?"

"Other than my girlfriend running off with a seven-foot Bulgarian Quidditch player?"

Ron threw up his hands. "Don't even try to pass this off on Hermione running away," he snapped. He was positively shaking with anger. "You show up here, all buddy-buddy with Malfoy, 'Oh, Malfoy's my roommate, Malfoy's my bestest friend, Malfoy's gonna be my brother, Malfoy, Malfoy, Malfoy.' And you know what kind of person he is!"

"He saved my life," said Harry.

"He just saved your life to get in Hermione's pants," said Ron in a cold voice.

"Didn't work," replied Harry, trying to grin.

"You don't know that," said Ron flatly.

Harry's grin disappeared. "That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny!" yelled Ron. "I'm trying to make you wake up and see sense! He's not your friend!"

"I know," said Harry.

Ron paused and looked at him in surprise.

"He's not my friend," said Harry. "I don't know what he is. I do know that I can trust him, at least where Hermione's concerned. And where I'm concerned. He was willing to die for me. You can't say that about a lot of people." Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, which was already standing up in an alarmingly Gothic manner. "You're my best friend," he said. "You know why? Because I chose you to be my friend. I didn't choose to have Malfoy in my life, but he is and not much I can do about it."

Some of the anger had faded out of Ron's expression. He looked tired now, leaning against the side of the house with his left hand cradling his bruised elbow. "I just don't get where Malfoy's trustworthy."

"Two reasons," said Harry. "One: Hermione loves him and as we all know, she is not stupid."

"You're losing me again," said Ron. "Why is it okay that Hermione loves him?"

"I said she loved him, I didn't say she was in love with him. She loves you, too, if it comes down to that, and I'm not beating the crap out of you, am I?"

Ron sighed. "You're either hugely self-confident or woefully deluded," he said, "and I'm not sure which."

"The second reason," said Harry, holding up a finger, "and the most important..." He pulled his jacket open, unzipped an inside pocket,

and took out a very battered object, which he handed to Ron.

Ron stared. "The Sneakoscope....the one I bought for you in Cairo! I didn't even know you still had it."

Harry was smiling. "It never goes off when Malfoy's around," he said. "Ergo...he's trustworthy."

"Ergo....it's broken," said Ron, but smiled grudgingly back.

"Nuh-uh," said Harry. "It's gone off a couple other times. When Malfoy and I were talking to Lupin; and I'm pretty sure there was stuff he wasn't telling us."

"Really?" said Ron, interested. "Like what?"

"Well, different things. And when we went into his office he shoved his copy of the Daily Prophet into his desk. I think he didn't want me reading about the Dementors vanishing."

"Well, he knows you're sort of...allergic to Dementors," said Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry, "But I can't believe he thinks I'm as fragile as all that. I mean after everything I've been through -" He glanced at Ron. "Everything we've been through, I should say. I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you." Harry looked faintly embarrassed now, but plowed ahead bravely. "When Sirius and Narcissa get married, Malfoy'll be my brother, technically...but you're my brother, really. I mean, if I could choose a brother, it'd be you."

Ron was now slightly pink around the ears, but looked pleased.

"Well," he said. "I mean. Same here."

Harry looked at him and grinned. "Now what? Do we share a manly embrace?"

"Nah. I think we're too inhibited." He hit Harry lightly on the shoulder. "I think we do that instead."

"Right," said Harry, and hit him back. "And then I think we'd better



go back inside, before your sister eviscerates Malfoy with a toasting fork."

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In terms of his assessment of the success of Draco and Ginny's interaction, Harry was not far off. As soon as Harry and her brother had left the kitchen, Ginny walked over to the table, sat down in a chair, crossed her arms, and glared at Draco.

He looked back at her, unfazed by her glare. He was used to being glared at. "You look different," he said.

"Good different or bad different?" said Ginny, with unwilling curiosity.

"Good different," said Draco. "You just got back from some foreign exchange program, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Ginny, playing absentmindedly with her tea saucer. "Have you traveled much?"

"Not unless you count the time my father tried to sell me to itinerant trolls."

Ginny frowned at Draco, who was looking back at her with a look of bland amusement on his face. "Are you trying to be funny?"

"If *I* was trying to be funny," Draco assured her, "*you* would be rolling around on the ground laughing."

"Still think a lot of yourself, I see," said Ginny. "Same old Malfoy."

Draco's eyes flashed. "Still in love with Harry, I see," he said with soft malice. "Same old Ginny."

Going scarlet, Ginny slammed her tea saucer down on the table and stood up. "No wonder Hermione picked Harry over you," she said as nastily as she possibly could. "You're *hateful*."

And she stormed off.

Draco watched her go. "Was it something I said?" he yelled after her, but she was out of earshot, so this was unsatisfying.

At that moment, the screen door opened, and Ron and Harry came in. Ron looked pointedly at the empty space where his sister had been sitting. "Where's Ginny?"

Draco had wiped the look of anger off his face and was looking innocent. "She ran off," he said.

"What did you do to scare her away, Malfoy?"

"Nothing," said Draco blandly, "She is afraid of her love for me."

Ron looked as if he were about to say something, but Harry interrupted him. "Can we return to the matter at hand?" he said. "As in Hermione, and where she's got to?"

"Right," said Ron and Draco together.

Harry took a deep breath. "Okay. We're going to have to look through Hermione's stuff. See if there's any clue as to where she might be. But I, uh, don't want to do it. Draco...how do you feel about going through her stuff without permission?"

"I feel pretty okay about it," said Draco.

"Somehow this is not surprising," said Harry.

"Right then," said Draco, and got up. "I'm off," and he took off running up the stairs. They heard him open the door to Hermione's room, then close it behind him. Then there was silence.

Harry and Ron looked at one another. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Ron.

"Yeah," said Harry, and got to his feet. They clattered up the stairs together and paused in front of the door to Hermione's room.

"Malfoy!" yelled Harry. "Did you find anything yet?"

"No!" Draco yelled back. "But I read her diary and tried on all her clothes."

Rolling his eyes, Ron pushed the door open. Draco was standing in the center of Hermione's room, his arms crossed over his chest and an odd expression on his face. The room was beautifully neat, as Hermione's room always was. Her trunk lay, untouched, on her bed.

Harry grinned, he couldn't help it. "You couldn't do it!" he crowed.

Draco looked very cross indeed. "I tried," he said. "I tried to go through her stuff, but I got these weird twisty feelings in my stomach."

"On Earth, we call those scruples," said Ron.

"Oh for goodness sake!" said an impatient voice. It was Ginny. She squeezed between Harry and Ron and stalked into the room. "Let me do it. I'm a girl, she's a girl, it's for her own good. Now back off, Malfoy," she snapped, and Draco, to his own surprise, did so, giving Ginny space to unlock Hermione's trunk and rifle through it. She did so, and, finding nothing, turned her attention to the desk, the drawers of which turned out to be mostly empty. Under the desk, however, she found a crumpled piece of paper, which she unfolded, read, and handed wordlessly to Harry.

He looked at it, and bit his lip. It was the letter that Hermione had started writing the day before and never finished, unable to find the right appellation for Harry. All it said was: *dearest Harry...darling Harry...Harry, my love.*

He looked up, and met Ginny's eyes across the room. "You don't really think there's the slightest chance she went off with Viktor of her own free will, do you?" said Ginny, sounding tired. "Harry? Do you?"

He looked down at the paper again, then folded it up and put it in

his pocket. "Let's go talk to Viktor Krum," he said.

"Hooray!" said Draco. "Let's go kick Viktor Krum's ass."

"We are not going to kick his ass," said Ron. "We are going to pump him for information."

"Right," agreed Draco cheerfully. "And if that doesn't work, then ass-kicking makes a solid backup plan."

"Speaking of plans," said Harry, and turned to Draco, "What was your brilliant plan for getting us into the London Quidditch Club?"

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"Er, hello," said Harry to the security wizard at the front desk of the Quidditch Club, which turned out to be a large and extremely beautiful hotel-like building off of Diagon Alley. It was set back from the road, but they had recognized it immediately as they flew over it by the flag that fluttered from its roof : two crossed broomsticks on a red background, surrounded by a circle of golden stars. "I'm Harry Potter, and I want to see Viktor Krum."

The security wizard snorted. "Get along with you," he said, not looking up. Harry turned around and looked at Ron and Draco, who were standing behind him, looking encouraging. (Ginny had remained at the Burrow on the off chance that Hermione might try to contact them there.)

Harry turned back to the wizard. "I'm Harry Potter," he said, again. "And I want to see Viktor Krum. He's expecting me."

"You're not -" said the guard, looked up, and broke off, staring from Harry's glasses to his lightning scar. "Cor," he said. "You are Harry Potter, aren't you?"

"For sixteen years now," said Harry evenly.

"Is it true you might be playing Quidditch for England next year?" said the wizard, looking open-mouthed at Harry.

Harry winked at him. "It's possible," he said. "Viktor was going to introduce me to some of the English players, you know. Try to exert a little influence."

The wizard looked ecstatic. "Harry Potter, playing Quidditch for England!" he exclaimed.

"Well, don't tell anyone," said Harry, leaning an elbow on the desk. "It's meant to be a secret."

"Oh, right, right," said the security wizard hastily. "And I'll ring up to Mr. Krum for you right away," he added eagerly. "He left word he wasn't to be disturbed, but seeing as it's you, Harry -- can I call you Harry?"

"Of course you can," said Harry, smiling benignly. Usually he loathed everything having to do with his fame in the wizarding world, but at the moment he found himself enjoying it a bit.

The wizard turned to the wall behind him, on which was a panel displaying a row of numbered buttons. He tapped one with his wand, and said, "Mr. Krum? Are you there?"

A very tiny image of Viktor Krum's face appeared on the smooth surface of the button. He looked cross. "Vot do you vant?"

"Harry Potter and -" He looked enquiringly at Draco and Ron.

"They're friends of mine," said Harry.

"-And his friends, are here to see you."

There was a short silence. Then Krum said, "Very well. I vill see him," and vanished.

Harry expelled his held breath as the wizard turned to him and smiled. "The Bulgarian team is upstairs on the second floor," he said. "Krum's is the first door on your right. And - can I have your autograph?"

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"See," said Draco, as they started up the staircase. "The best plans are the simplest ones, just like the best lies are founded on a grain of truth."

"Is that a Malfoy family saying?" said Ron, acidly. "I'd like to hear the rest of them."

"My favorite was always 'You can get more with a kind word and a really big stick than you can with just a kind word,'" said Draco cheerfully. "My father used to say that. Oh look, here we are."

Harry knocked on the door, which was opened a moment later by Viktor Krum, wearing his red Bulgarian Quidditch robes and looking irritable. "Harry," he said, glanced with recognition at Ron, and blankly at Draco. "It's good to see you, but it is rather late, is it not?"

"I need to ask you something, Viktor," said Harry. "It's - it's about Hermione."

Looking startled, Viktor stepped back and allowed all three of them to walk into his room, which, given the luxurious nature of the rest of the Club, was actually quite spartan. There was a simple bed as well as a table and some chairs, and Quidditch equipment everywhere.

Viktor did not suggest that they sit down, nor did he look particularly welcoming in any way. Instead he turned, crossed his arms over his chest, and growled, "Vell? Vot is this about?"

Looking at Krum standing in front of Harry and Draco, Ron began to see the foolhardiness inherent in their plan. For all Draco's talk of kicking Viktor Krum's ass, it was evident that this was an unlikely proposition. Both Harry and Draco were built along the same lines - wiry and slender. Viktor Krum, on the other hand, was both extremely tall and extremely wide -- not fat, but burly. He could have bench-pressed Harry and had energy left over to toss Draco the length of an Olympic swimming pool.

Wordlessly, Harry reached into his pocket, extracted Hermione's letter, and handed it to Viktor, who took it and read it. When he glanced up, there was obvious astonishment on his face. "This letter," he said, "it is really from Herm-my-own-ninny?"

Harry nodded. "I'd know her writing anywhere."

"It is a joke, then," said Viktor, handing the letter back to Harry. "I haff not seen Her-my-own-ninny in two years. And I certainly haff not-I mean, I haff never-" He shrugged. "Well, as you can see, I am not in Bulgaria. I do not know the meaning of this letter."

"Did you write to her and ask her to meet you at the Leaky Cauldron?" asked Draco.

Krum shook his head. "I did not."

"I saw Hermione," said Ron. "Last night. She said she was leaving with you, for Bulgaria. She got onto a broomstick with you--well, it was dark, but it looked a lot like you."

Viktor was looking distinctly uneasy now. "I do not know where she is," he said. "I tell you, I haff not seen Her-my-own-ninny - I haff no memory of seeing her -"

"Then if you don't mind my asking," said Harry, "where were you last night?"

Viktor opened his mouth, then shut it again. He looked from Harry to Draco, to Ron, all of whom were staring at him. Then he said, "I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" echoed Ron.

"No," said Krum, looking very unhappy now. "Yesterday, I have Quidditch practice in the morning. Then, I come back here. I think perhaps I go to sleep, because when I wake up this morning, I do not remember anything I did yesterday. I think perhaps I had the flu, or was overtired."

"So you're saying you just don't remember anything from yesterday or last night?" said Harry in disbelief.

"That is correct," said Krum.

"And on the day the words 'flimsy excuse' were reinvented," said Draco, "we all stood around in awe and watched."

"I tell you, it is the truth!" shouted Krum, looking agitated. "I haff no memory of yesterday! And when I wake up this morning I am very alarmed because -" He broke off.

"Because what?" said Harry, narrowing his eyes.

Krum's expression of unhappiness deepened. It was evident he was fighting some sort of strong internal battle. Finally he sighed, and said, half to himself, "I suppose I must...I suppose I had better..."

"What?" prompted Harry, now nearly desperate with anxiety.

"When I wake up this morning, I see this," said Krum, and pulled up his sleeves. He held out his arms for their inspection.

Deep scratches ran up Krum's forearms and his left wrist was braceleted by five dark red, half-moon-shaped indentations. Harry knew immediately what they were. The marks of nails that had been driven into Krum's wrist -- driven by someone who was trying pull his hands away? He had a sudden image of Hermione, struggling as Krum clamped their hand over her mouth, and felt suddenly, violently ill.

But it was Draco who reacted first. He had his wand out and was pointing it at Krum before either Harry or Ron had moved.

"I am telling you," said Krum, looking desperately unhappy and still holding his mangled wrists out in front of him. "I do not remember anything!"

"We'll just see about that," said Draco, shoving the tip of his wand



into Krum's sternum. "*Veritas!*"

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Waking up was like rising slowly upward through dark, murky water. Hermione lay still for several moments, drifting in the inchoate gray space between sleeping and waking. Vague images passed before her closed eyelids -- a plume of black smoke, a clearing between dark, wet trees, a train. Faces she didn't recognize. Then Harry's face, looking tired and worried. But why?

Hermione opened her eyes. It took a moment for them to focus on her surroundings. Then she sat up, and stared around her in astonishment.

She was lying on the floor of a small, circular room, no bigger than her room back at the Burrow, although the ceiling of this room was at least fifteen feet high. But this room was built out of stone blocks, blocks that looked very, very ancient. There was a door in one wall, made of oak and crisscrossed with strips of iron, that looked almost as old as the walls. One window, high above her head and shuttered with iron bars, let in a tiny amount of gray light. The room was completely unfurnished, except for a quantity of straw piled on the floor. It was this straw on which Hermione had been lying.

A sense of disorientation more intense than any she had ever experienced washed over her. These surroundings were not just unfamiliar but alien, and in no way corresponded to where she had expected to wake up -- safely tucked in bed at the Burrow. Hermione cast her mind back desperately -- where could she possibly be? The last thing she remembered was walking into the Leaky Cauldron with Ginny - seeing Viktor there - she had followed him into the back room, and then -

There was a loud rattling noise. Hermione looked up in panic, and saw the knob of the enormous door beginning to turn. She tried to stand up, but couldn't - her legs were still too wobbly. Instead, she skittered backwards on her elbows, away from the door.

It opened slowly and a tall, hooded figure entered the room. He -- if

it was a he-- wore a floor-length wizard's robe of thick green velvet, banded with silver at the throat, and gloves of black satin.

Hermione opened her mouth to ask where she was, how she had gotten her, but her throat had closed up and no sound came out.

The wizard raised his hands very slowly, took hold of the hood of his cloak, and drew it back.

Hermione screamed.

Read? Review!

References:

1) *Whosoever comes across such an object must know that it is a Talisman of Purest Evil, and should only be dealt with in a manner pursuant to its destruction.* The Evil Overlord List. Linked to from the end of Chapter Three.

2) You wouldn't know a cunning plan if it painted itself blue and danced naked on a harpsichord singing 'Cunning plans are here again'!" Blackadder.

3)"Right," agreed Draco cheerfully. "And if that doesn't work, then ass-kicking makes a solid backup plan." -- Buffy.

4) 'You can get more with a kind word and a really big stick than you can with just a kind word.' Al Capone once said "'You can get more with a kind word and a gun than you can with just a kind word.'

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Draco Sinister

Chapter Three - Darkness Visible

"Padfoot," said Remus Lupin softly, staring into the embers of the fire dying in his office grate. "Are you there? Can you hear me?"

He was sitting at his desk, in the dark, an empty wineglass in his hand. He hadn't been drinking - he didn't drink much, and rarely alone - but he liked the feel of the glass in his hand, liked watching the moonlight from the window run around its rim like a darting point of fire. He put it down, stretched, and picked up a paperweight off his desk. Sirius had given it to him the year before. It was a clear glass snow globe in which reclined the figure of a tiny, pretty, red-haired nymph, resting on a miniature rock, playing the oboe. (Because it was a magic globe, the snow fell all the time, without needing to be shaken.) Lupin had always thought she looked a bit like Lily, although he never would have said so to Sirius.

The nymph put her oboe down and looked at him. "Go to sleep, Remus," she said. "It's late."

"I'm waiting for Padfoot," he said, softly. "We were supposed to talk." He put the globe down, got up from the desk, and walked over to the dying fire. He sat down and leaned his back against the brick of the fireplace, shutting his eyes. "Sirius Black," he whispered. "Where have you got to now?"

"I'm here," said a voice at his elbow.

Lupin opened his eyes and glanced down, saw Sirius' head and shoulders in the fire, and grinned.

"Sorry," said Sirius. "It took me a while to find a proper wizarding house with a fireplace. Not many fireplaces in this part of Greece. Too hot."

"Greece looks like it agrees with you," said Lupin. This was the truth; Sirius looked healthy and tanned and smiling, and the deadened, haunted look of Azkaban was nearly gone from his eyes. Nearly gone - Lupin doubted that it would ever leave Sirius entirely.

"It does," said Sirius. He tilted his black eyes up to Lupin. "You said you wanted to talk to me about Harry," he said. "Is he all right?"

"Harry's all right," said Lupin. "Well, as all right as expected. He's sixteen; he's got a load of new powers dumped on him and no way to deal with them. He's separated from his friends, and of course, every year of his life since he was eleven someone's tried to kill him. I think he's feeling a little weary and resentful."

"He's not separated from his friends," said Sirius. "He's got Draco."

"The Malfoy boy?" said Lupin, in surprise. "It was my impression they hated each other. Just this afternoon I had to pull Harry off him, he nearly beat him to a pulp in the hallway. Very unlike Harry. The Malfoy boy shrugged it off, said Harry was upset over breaking up with his girlfriend."

"What, with Hermione?"

"Oh, so you knew about that?" Lupin said with interest.

"Harry never told me," replied Sirius with a grin. "It's my impression he'd rather suffer the Cruciatus Curse than tell me about his love life. But -" Sirius' shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I guessed."

"How?"

"Canine intuition," said Sirius. "And the fact that whenever he saw Hermione, he looked like someone had hit him with a Bludger. James used to look at Lily that way. It's an unmistakable sign."

Lupin was grinning again. "I remember when you were sixteen and you-

"Oh no," interrupted Sirius firmly. "We're not talking about me. We are talking about HARRY."

"Actually it was the Malfoy boy I wanted to talk to you about," said Lupin. "Draco. Terrible name, by the way. Poor kid."

"Whereas 'Remus' is really gaining popularity," said Sirius.

Lupin smiled. "Now you sound like yourself again," he said. "You must be fond of the Malfoy boy. Sorry. Draco."

"I am," said Sirius. "He's not like his father. He reminds me of me at that age."

"In other words, he's a maladjusted ticking time bomb with a pigheaded streak the size of Bristol?"

"Not exactly," said Sirius, sounding amused. "Come on, Moony. What gives? Is he in trouble?"

"I don't know," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Either he's in no trouble at all, or he's in worse trouble than we can possibly imagine."

"Moony..." Sirius sounded exasperated.

"All right." Lupin reached up and took a book off the top of his desk, balancing it on his knees. It was the same book that Harry and Draco had seen on his desk the day before, but there was no way for him to know that. "I really wonder if it was a good idea, Sirius, to let him keep that Magid sword of his."

"I didn't let him keep it. That was Dumbledore's decision."

"I suppose he had his reasons," said Lupin dubiously. "But that sword...if it's the sword I think it is...it's a very powerful and evil object."

"It was Salazar Slytherin's sword, wasn't it?"

"Well, there's the possibility it might be a fake or an imitation. I can

see why the Malfoys, or any magical family, might want to claim they possessed something like that. The story goes that Salazar Slytherin sold his soul to a powerful demon in exchange for the use of a sword that would make the bearer invincible."

"Did it work?"

"Certainly. Slytherin won every battle he ever took part in. And then, one day - he vanished. Just vanished. Never seen again. And the sword was thought to be lost as well. In fact, the story goes that he reneged on his deal with the demons; he wasn't meant to keep the sword forever, but he refused to give it back at the appointed time, so..." Lupin shrugged. "No one knows what happened to him, but it's generally considered that it wasn't good."

"He must not have been reading his Evil Overlord handbook," grinned Sirius. "Rule 54: 'I will not strike a bargain with a demonic being, then attempt to double-cross it simply because I feel like being contrary.'"

Lupin rolled his eyes. "Sirius..."

"Sorry, I just honestly don't see what all of this has to do with Draco," said Sirius.

"It's a demon sword, Sirius," said Lupin irritably. "It's got a lot of power and it has its own intelligence. Whether that intelligence is benevolent or malevolent, I don't know. It takes will and strength and skill to master something like that, and he's just a child."

"When we were sixteen, we didn't think we were children."

"Oh, but we were. Think how things might have turned out differently if we'd been a bit smarter, a bit more patient, a bit less trusting. Peter might not have turned out like he did, and James - James might be -"

"Don't," interrupted Sirius. "Don't say it."

Lupin sighed. "There's one other thing."

"Oh, no," said Sirius, with finality.

"What?"

"I know you. Whenever you say 'there's just one other thing' it means you've been saving up the worst possible news for last. 'Everything's perfectly fine, there's just one other thing, Harry got himself eaten by a basilisk.' That sort of thing." Sirius sighed. "Well, go on. Tell me."

"There's a prophecy about the sword."

"Bugger," said Sirius glumly. "Well, what is it?"

Reading from the book, Lupin said: "When the sword is once again wielded in battle by a descendant of Slytherin, Slytherin himself will return, and he and his descendant will join together to wreak havoc and terror on the wizarding world."

"I sometimes wonder how you can say these things with a straight face, Remus. Sorry!" Sirius added good-naturedly at Lupin's dark expression. "Well, I don't think we have anything to worry about yet. Draco hadn't wielded the sword in battle as far as I know. Harry was the one who used it against Lucius."

Lupin expelled a breath of relief. "That's good. That's what I wanted to know."

"Just keep him away from it," said Sirius.

"Oh, right," Lupin replied. "Do you remember when we were sixteen, and people told us just to stay away from something, how obedient we were?"

Sirius' eyes lit up with a smile. Lupin had only ever seen Sirius smile like that at a few people in his life. At James. At Lily. At himself. And at Harry. Maybe he smiled at Narcissa like that; Lupin didn't know. He hoped he did. "We were terrible, weren't we?" Sirius said.

"No," said Lupin, smiling back. "We weren't terrible. We were great."

Hermione screamed.

And skittered backwards, on her elbows, as far away from the horror that was blocking the doorway as she possibly could. She hit the wall and pressed herself back against it, squeezing her eyes shut.

Calm down, she told herself. Be brave. Be like Harry. Harry's seen worse things than this. Be like Harry.

She opened her eyes.

And saw what she had seen before. The wizard who had entered the room was still standing where he had been standing, motionless, his dark hood pulled back to show his face. It was the face of a man about Sirius' age - an face as white as salt, with enormous, prominent cheekbones, and white hair that was matted and shaggy. This man had a large, beaky nose and razor-thin eyebrows, and his mouth was a grim hard line. He was incredibly thin, even thinner than Sirius had been when he came out of Azkaban. Tattooed on each bony cheek was the clear image of a skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth. The Dark Mark. It was horrible to look at, but that wasn't why Hermione had screamed.

It was because she knew who he was. How could she not? There were statues of him, portraits of him, all over Hogwarts. And yet it was impossible.

Dark magic, she thought. This is very dark magic. He is dead. Dead for a thousand years. And to raise the dead was necromancy, the worst kind of black magic there was.

He took a few steps toward her, and she stared at his feet, encased in thick black boots, because she couldn't bring herself to look back up that awful, scarred, marked face again. As he neared her, she he

realized that a powerful smell was wafting off his robes - a smell like burning brandy.

There was a heavy thuck-thuck noise as he dropped to his knees next to her. "Look at me," he said. His voice buzzed as if his skeletal throat had been stuffed with flies or locusts. "Look at me."

Hermione looked up, although she didn't want to. She tried to clear her throat, couldn't, and said in a tiny voice that sounded as if it were being sucked through a straw, "Who are you?"

"Don't you know me, Rowena?" said the buzzing voice. "I know I no longer look as I did. But you should still know your own Salazar."

"*Veritas!*"

Krum gasped as the Truth spell took hold of him. Draco knew how he felt; knew the agonizing pain of it, the feeling of being ripped open and exposed, but had neither the time nor the inclination to feel sorry for Viktor Krum.

"Where is Hermione?" he demanded.

"I -don't- know," Viktor bit out between gritted teeth.

"Malfoy -" said Ron, in a hissing whisper, "It's illegal to use the Veritas curse - you could get Azkaban time for this."

"I don't care," said Draco, not looking at Ron, but at Harry, who looked back at him with much the same expression he was sure he wore himself -grim resolution. It was the same expression Harry wore when he played Quidditch and was utterly determined to get the Snitch. When they had played against each other, that look on Harry's face had made Draco nervous. Now he found it oddly reassuring.

"Go ahead, Malfoy," Harry said.

"Please," Viktor interrupted unexpectedly. "I - I want to know the truth as well. Please ask me whatever you must."

Draco looked back at Krum uncertainly. Krum was pale and was biting his lip with pain, but seemed sincere. "All right," said Draco, still holding the wand steady. "Viktor," he said. "Tell us what you remember from yesterday."

Krum spoke, slowly and with effort. "In the morning, we play against Romania," he grunted. "We lose, and I am very angry because of it. I am also angry because they have not secured the tents for the players. When I return to my tent there is a man there and I have to chase him out."

"What kind of man?" said Harry, in a very tight voice.

"A very ordinary man," said Viktor. "You must understand, we have people in our tents all the time -- fans, and other such, they break in. This one, he wanted to give me a bottle of Bulgarian wine. So I drank some, and he went off. I walked back to my rooms and --" Viktor looked down. "I fell asleep, I think. I remember nothing more."

"Viktor," said Draco steadily, "What happened when you got back to your room. You didn't go to sleep. What did you do?"

Krum was pale and sweating. "I don't remember."

Draco was gripping the wand so tightly now that his knuckles turned white. "What did you do?"

Krum shook his head, clutching his chest as if it pained him. "I don't remember!"

"He's lying," said Harry flatly.

"You can't lie under the Veritas curse," said Draco in a low voice, turning his head to look at Harry. "I should know."

"It's a memory charm, then," whispered Ron. "He's telling the truth

as he thinks it is."

"You can break a memory charm," said Harry, in the same flat, determined voice. "Malfoy. Give me your hand."

"Why?" said Draco, warily. The last time Harry had asked Draco to give him his hand, he'd sliced his palm open with a penknife.

"Because," said Harry, under his breath. "If we both hold the wand, and do the spell, it might be strong enough to break through the Memory charm."

"It might," Draco conceded. "It also might be strong enough to reduce Bulgaria's best Quidditch player to a gibbering loon with the brainpower of a four-month-old child."

"I don't think so," said Harry. "Not if we concentrate."

"This is what I mean about letting Gryffindors plan things," snapped Draco. He and Harry were standing so close together, he could see himself reflected in Harry's glasses. He looked anxious and cross. "What kind of plan is 'concentrate'?"

"Harry," interrupted Ron, anxiously. He couldn't quite hear what they were saying from where he stood, but Harry's expression was making him nervous. "Harry, I don't think-

Ignoring him, Harry reached out and grabbed Draco's left hand (did you ever doubt Draco was a lefty?), interlocking their fingers around the wand. As he did so, the scar on his palm brushed the scar on Draco's, and Draco felt a jolt of freezing cold lance through his skin. He saw Harry's eyes flick up to his nervously. He had felt it, too.

"This is a bad idea," said Draco, with foreboding.

With another grim look, Harry turned the wand, now held in both their hands, towards Viktor. "Veritas," he whispered.

Draco felt his hand jerk forward as if someone had yanked it. The wand shook in their joint grasp and he tightened his grip as a bolt

of black light shot from the tip and struck Krum in the sternum, nearly knocking him sideways. Krum yelled out loud in agony, and fell to his knees, clutching his chest.

Ron looked horrified. "Harry, what did you do?"

Harry had released the wand, and dropped to his knees beside Krum, laying his hand on Krum's shoulder. "Viktor," he said urgently. "I want to take this off you as quickly as possible, but you have to tell us, what happened to you yesterday? Where were you last night?"

"After the game I go back to my room," said Krum, looking startled to hear the sound of his own voice. Draco knew how he felt; the Veritas curse didn't just force you to tell the truth, it impelled you to speak - and speak - and speak. "I lie down on the bed. I am feeling very strange and I think it is the wine. Then there is a knocking on my door. I get up and answer it. It is the man that was in my tent. He points his hand at me and says Imperio."

A look of astonishment spread over Viktor's face. He obviously hadn't been aware of any of this. "Then he gives me a.. a.. *kak shte kazhesh tova na Angliyski....* "

Ron, Draco and Harry glanced uncertainly at one another, none of them knowing any Bulgarian to speak of. But Viktor seemed to be back on track.

"A glass, a bottle, of a liquid, he gave it to me and then he gave me instructions. I put on my cloak and walk out into Diagon Alley. I go to the Leaky Cauldron. I am waiting there until I see her, Her-my-own-ninny, come in the door." Viktor now sounded wistful. "she looks very happy and pretty. I ask her to come and speak to me for a moment. We go into the back room. She turns around to ask me a question, and I seize hold of her. I cover her mouth so she cannot scream and I force her to drink the potion."

Krum's eyes were wide with horror. Draco, Harry and Ron were staring at him in shock and growing fear.

"Now she is quiet, she is docile. She does what I tell her. She gets rid of the girl with red hair. She comes back into the room. We wait together and the man comes. He points his hand at her and says "Imperio..." Krum paused. "She is crying. He has to do the spell twice. Finally we leave, Her-my-own-ninny, and I. We fly to the Burrow and I wait while she goes to get her things and to write a letter to Harry. Then we get on my broom and we fly to King's Cross Station." Viktor's voice was growing hoarse now, whether from physical pain or from shock, Harry couldn't tell. "The man is waiting there, in Muggle clothes. He takes Her-my-own-ninny from me. Then I leave, and come back here. When I wake up..." He shook his head. "I remember nothing."

"Harry," hissed Ron urgently. He was standing by the door now, looking even more anxious. "Harry, someone's going to come - someone must have heard Krum screaming -"

But Harry was still staring at Viktor. "Where did he take her?"

"I do not know! I do not know! You must believe me. Harry, you know I would never do anything to bring harm to Her-my-own-ninny!"

Harry stood up and backed away from Viktor, who was still half-sitting, half-lying against the foot of the bed, looking utterly wrung out. Harry himself looked nearly as bad - he looked as if he were going to be sick. He took a step toward Draco. "I think we should hit him with the spell again," he said, under his breath. "Maybe there's something - maybe he knows-"

"No," said Ron's voice, unexpectedly.

They both turned and looked at him, leaning against the door, looking both panicked and angry. "Why would whoever took Hermione let Krum know where they were going?" he said. "Obviously they were just using him. If he weren't so famous, they probably would have killed him. If he says he doesn't know, I believe it. And Harry," he added, his voice tightening, "you're hurting him. It's not like you. I'm sorry, but both of you are pretty

deranged where Hermione's concerned, so I think I should make this decision." He raised his wand, pointed it at Krum. "*Finite* -"

"Wait," said Harry, quickly. "One more question. Just one more." He turned to Krum. "You said the man pointed his hand at Hermione when he performed the Imperius Curse. His hand, not his wand. Did he not use a wand?"

Krum shook his head. "No," he said raggedly. "He used his hand."

"A Magid, then," said Draco.

"It was not an ordinary hand," said Krum. "He was a very ordinary little man. Small, and fat. But his hand was made of silver."

Harry looked at Ron and Draco, who were staring at him with identical expressions of horror. It was Harry who spoke first.

"*Wormtail*," he whispered.

"*Rowena*?" gasped Hermione in disbelief.

"My beautiful Rowena," said the wizard who had called himself Salazar. He reached out a gloved hand and touched Hermione's hair. She didn't move, even though the smell of burning alcohol made her throat sting.

"That's not my name," said Hermione. "I'm - you have the wrong person. The wrong girl."

"I wouldn't disagree with him if I were you," said a sharp and malicious voice. Hermione turned her head, and with very little surprise saw the familiar short, fat figure of Wormtail standing in the doorway. He was wearing gray robes, his silver hand protruding from the right sleeve. There was an ugly smirk on his face. "You do realize who you're talking to?"

Hermione kept her eyes fixed on Wormtail as she replied. He was no

beauty pageant winner, but at least he still had his entire face. "How did I get here?" she demanded, trying to keep her voice firm.

"Wormtail brought you to me," said the buzzing voice at her left. "He is a very faithful servant."

"Not that faithful," said Hermione to Wormtail in a shaking voice. "Considering that two weeks ago he was serving the Dark Lord!"

"Now I serve the Master of my Master," said Wormtail. "The greatest of the Hogwarts Four, the most fearsome wizard ever to hold a wand." He grinned emptily at her. "Do you know who I am talking about? Hogwarts has gone sadly downhill if they no longer even teach their students a proper understanding of history."

Hermione shut her eyes. "Salazar Slytherin is dead," she said. "And the dead can't come back."

"It hurts me to hear you say that, my love," said the buzzing voice in her ear. Salazar Slytherin's voice - her mind didn't want to accept it, couldn't accept it. Something this horrible couldn't be happening to her. His black-gloved hand closed on her arm, and the shock of his grip was the single most unpleasant sensation Hermione had ever experienced. He hauled her upright on her wobbly legs, and turned her so that she faced him. "After so many years wandering the gray spaces," he said. "You brought me back to the world."

"I did what?" Hermione gasped.

"It was you who created the spell that broke the charm that held me captive," said Slytherin. "Surely you did it on purpose?"

She looked desperately away from him, and saw Wormtail gazing at her. "Your Whirlwind Charm," he said. "Very clever, that. But perhaps not entirely sensible. It may have had," he leered coldly, "unintended consequences."

"I don't understand," she panted, looking from one of them to the other.

"Don't you remember?" said Slytherin, gazing at her out of his empty eyes. "When I told you that I would never truly die?"

"No!" said Hermione sharply. "I don't remember, because I'm not who you think I am." She looked desperately at the skeletal face before her. "Rowena Ravenclaw is dead," she said. "She's been dead a thousand years."

In reponse, one of his gloved hands shot out and seized at her neck. For a moment, she thought he was going to choke her. Then she realized, with horror, that he had seized the Epicyclical Charm and was holding it in his fist. "You wear my descendant's life around your neck," he said. "As once, Rowena wore mine. When I awoke, the first thing I saw was your face, through his eyes. And I saw that he loved you, just as once I had loved her. History repeating itself. I saw Godric, too, through his eyes," Slytherin said, with a snarl. "When she left me for Godric, it destroyed everything that I had worked for, everything I had nearly achieved. I won't let that happen again, my love."

"I'm not your love," said Hermione, with desperate fury.

"Maybe not yet," said Salazar Slytherin. "But you will be."

Ginny was sitting in the kitchen listening to the wall clock tick when the door opened and Harry, Ron and Draco walked in, carrying their brooms and looking utterly exhausted. At least, Draco and Ron looked exhausted. Harry looked a degree worse than exhausted, as if he'd been wrung out by some terrible ordeal.

Ron and Draco tossed their brooms into the corner; Harry leaned his carefully on the wall next to the door. Ginny watched him from the kitchen, her heart aching with the suppressed desire to run over and put her arms around him; he looked so unhappy.

Ron walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Anything?" he said quietly.

Ginny shook her head. "No word from her."

None of them looked particularly surprised. "Thanks for waiting, Ginny," said Harry in a deadly tired voice.

"Did you - learn anything?" asked Ginny anxiously.

Harry shrugged. "Yes and no."

"Is she all right?"

The answer to this question was a dead silence. Harry said, "I'm going to go wash up. I'll be right back," turned, and went upstairs.

Ginny looked miserably at Ron. "What happened?"

Ron sighed. He looked over at Draco, who was leaning against the kitchen wall. "We talked to Krum," he said, and told Ginny exactly what had happened. "I guess we were pretty lucky," he said, after he had finished telling the story. "Nobody caught us, and when I took the spell off Viktor, he seemed fine. Couldn't remember anything he'd told us under the Veritas curse. Couldn't even remember why we were there."

"I had to get his autograph," said Draco, trying to sound light. "It was very embarrassing."

"Is Harry okay?" asked Ginny, looking up at her brother. She tried to read his eyes, as she had been able to do when she was younger. Right now they said Harry's not all right and I wish you didn't care.

"He needs to sleep," said Ginny. "You all need to sleep."

"Good luck convincing Harry of that," said Ron.

"He's really upset about Hermione, isn't he?" said Ginny.

"He's upset about Viktor," said Draco. "He's upset by the thought of what he's capable of when he's pushed."

Ron looked at Draco bitterly. "What do you know?" he said.

"More than you think," said Draco, with a touch of his old scornful drawl. He shrugged and walked out through the screen door, letting it bang shut behind him.

"I'm going to see if Harry's all right," said Ginny, ignoring Ron's expression, and went upstairs.

Draco stood in the Weasleys' garden, letting the silver moonlight run down over him like milky rain. It was a cool, wet night, and the garden smelled like mint and dirt and rosemary. It was nothing like the gardens at Malfoy Manor, which always smelled of metal and leaf mold and blood.

He turned and faced south, the direction of his home, and reached into his pocket, realizing in sudden irritation, *I don't have my wand*. Then he thought: *that doesn't matter*. Magids his age weren't supposed to perform wandless magic; that was true. Then again, neither were they supposed to sneak away from school in the dead of night for the purpose of putting powerful and illegal curses on famous international athletes. Wandless magic seemed minor in comparison. *Sod that stupid rule*, he thought, and raised his left hand, holding it straight out before him. The moonlight picked out the vivid silver lightning bolt scar across his palm as if it had been drawn there in liquid mercury.

Strange that the hand that Harry chose to cut is the hand that I do magic with. And the same for him. Was that conscious, I wonder?

He shrugged off the question and concentrated hard, thinking of the object he wanted, picturing it where it had lain the last time that he had seen it. For a summoning charm to work, it didn't matter how far away the object to be summoned was, but one had to know *where* it was, and he did: on his father's desk. He pictured his father's study as he had last seen it, building the image in his head,

even the smell of it: books and brandy and black magic. He shut his eyes and raised his left hand.

"*Accio!*"

Ginny found Harry in Percy's old bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed, untouched since Percy had last been there with its plain blue sheets and hospital corners. He had taken off his glasses and was sitting with his legs drawn up, his head on his knees.

Ginny sat down next to him, feeling the bed sink under her weight. "Harry," she said. "You need to get some sleep."

He raised his head slowly. "I´m not tired."

She was always startled by how different he looked with his glasses off. Younger, of course, but less gentle somehow; colder, and more capable of hardness. There was a line etched between his eyebrows now, that smoothed itself out as he looked at her, trying to smile. She wondered how many years it would take for that line to become a permanent dent between his eyes that never vanished, whether or not he was smiling. She wondered if she would be there to see it.

"Of course you´re tired," she said. "You´ve been up for hours, flown for miles. You need to sleep. You won´t be any good at all to Hermione if you fall off your broomstick and drown in the Channel."

"I´m not any good to her anyway," said Harry bitterly. "This is all my fault."

"It´s not your fault!" said Ginny, outraged. "How could it be your fault? It´s more my fault than it is yours - I should never have left her alone with Viktor in the Leaky Cauldron -"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "There´s no reason for Wormtail to kidnap her except to get at me. She´s only in danger because of what she means to me. Just like Sirius was, and Ron, and everyone

else I care about."

"Well," said Ginny, trying to sound light, "At least Malfoy's safe."
Harry forced a laugh. "I guess so," he said, and reached up to push his hair out of his eyes. "Ginny..."

"Please, Harry," she said. "Promise me you'll get some sleep. We can put Malfoy in Charlie's old room and you can stay here. Then we can get started on whatever needs to be done first thing in the morning."

Harry hesitated a moment, then nodded. "You're right," he said. "I know you're right." He smiled at her, and her stomach flipped over. "There's just one thing, Ginny, if you wouldn't mind; I'd really rather not be by myself right now, so..."

Ginny stared at him. "Yes?" she said in a tiny voice.

"Could you ask Ron to come up? I don't feel like going downstairs, but I'd really like to talk to him."

"Oh," she said. She stood up. "Oh. Of course. I'll - I'll go get him right now."

On the first floor landing, she passed Draco, who was carrying a large green book in his arms. She had a sudden, savage urge to kick him in the ankle, but knew it was unjustified and restrained herself. "You're in that bedroom," she said, pointing down the hallway toward Charlie's room, which was next to hers. "There are blankets in the cupboard. And don't ask me to make your bed, because I won't."

He looked at her curiously. "What's bothering you?" he asked. "Potteritis again?" He didn't change expression, but she could tell just by looking at him that there was a smirk chasing around inside his tidy blond head, trying to find its way out.

"I violently despise you," she said. "I just thought you should know that."

"And I really don't care," said Draco, stepping neatly around her and heading off down the hallway to Charlie's room. Ginny stood for a moment, staring after him. For some reason she couldn't decipher, she now felt even worse than she had before.

He was standing in a chamber that was somewhere underground - he didn't know how he knew that, but he did. He wore robes of black and green and silver, and boots of black dragon-hide leather. He could tell without looking down that several inches had been added to the bottoms of his shoes to give him extra height. But he could still feel the heat that radiated from the floor burning through his bootsoles.

He was not alone down here. They stood around him in a semi-circle. There were seven of them. And Draco recognized them immediately; recognized their long two-fingered hands, their smooth and earless heads. Demons. Only they wore long robes of black and red, and the tallest of them all, the one in the center of the half-circle, carried something in its outstretched hands.

A long silver sword whose hilt was set with a multitude of green jewels.

"You have come here to make an exchange with us," said the tallest demon.

And Draco heard himself speak. His voice was not his own voice, but the voice of a man much older. "Yes, I have."

"And do you know what this exchange entails?"

"I give you what you want," the Draco-who-was-not-Draco said. "And you give me the sword."

"With this sword a man could work miracles," said the demon.

"I have no interest in miracles," said the Draco-who-was-not. "I have

an interest in power. I have been told such a sword will give me power. Is that the truth?"

"There is such a thing as too much power," said the demon.

And the dream-Draco laughed. "I don't believe that," he said.

"You must at least believe that there is a natural balance to all things," said the demon. "For every profit in one thing, payment in some other thing. You will profit greatly by the use of this sword, but first it must be paid for."

And Draco felt his hands - which seemed solid and real, hardly like dream-hands at all - go to his throat, and loosen the pin there, and he drew his cloak back and the shirt that was under it so that his chest was bare.

"Take your payment," he said.

The demon reached out its spatulated hand, and flexed its long fingers. Then, like a boxer punching his way through a flimsy cardboard wall, the demon plunged its hand into Draco's chest. The agony was immediate and intense and terrible, but it lasted only a moment. Draco screamed, and the demon drew its hand back. It was clutching something in its blood-streaked fingers - something that glowered and flickered weakly like candlelight through a screen.

The demon smiled. Its incisors were long and sharp and pointed.

"The sword is yours," it said. "Hell is now satisfied."

"Malfoy! Malfoy! Wake up!"

Someone had him by the shoulder and was shaking him. He twisted away, covering his face with his arms. He was vaguely aware of someone screaming. There were hands tugging at his arms, trying to pull them away from his face. "Wake up!" said the voice again, despairingly, and then, "Malfoy, *please!*"

He opened his eyes. The screaming stopped, and it was suddenly, blessedly quiet. That was me screaming, Draco realized. That was me.

It was dark in the bedroom. The only light was silver moonlight pouring through the window: it illuminated the girl leaning over him, her anxious, dark eyes and long, curling hair. In the half-dark, she looked like--

"Hermione?" he whispered, only half awake.

"No, it's Ginny."

He drew his arms away from his face slowly. "Of course," he said. "You wouldn't be her. She calls me by my first name." He blinked and stared at her. "What are you doing in here?"

"What am I doing in here?" echoed Ginny irritably. "You were screaming like a banshee, that's what I'm doing in here. I thought someone was murdering you. Look where you are, Malfoy."

Draco sat up and looked around him in surprise. He was no longer on the bed but half-lying on the floor, in a welter of tangled bedsheets. He didn't remember falling off the bed, but then he didn't remember screaming either. What he did remember was his dream. He sucked in breath through his teeth, remembering the pain, the demon's hand punching through his chest. The heat. The sword.

When Ginny spoke again, her voice was uncertain. "Malfoy..."

"What?"

"You're bleeding."

Startled, he glanced down and saw, on the front of his shirt, just over his heart, a spreading red stain the size of a dinner plate. Draco put his hand to the stain and his fingers came away red. Not old blood, but new.

He looked up at Ginny. "Get Harry," he said hoarsely.

Ginny scrambled to her feet and headed for the door.

Halfway there, Draco called out to her. "Wait!"

She turned around. He was kneeling amid the blankets. He had taken his shirt off and was looking down at his chest, which was quite a bit paler than the rest of him in the silver light. It was also completely unmarked; there was no wound there at all. "Never mind," he said. "It looks like I´m all right after all."

"Was that...not your blood?" she said, bewildered.

He looked up at Ginny, and the moonlight struck cold sparks from his silver eyes. "I don't know. But I think I'm beginning to have an idea. And I'm not liking it much."

"Does it have to do with your nightmare?"

"Yes," he said, then shook his head. "I mean, no. I mean, I´m not sure it was a nightmare. I think it was a flashback. Or maybe a delusion. Or maybe I had a flashback in the middle of a delusion. Is that possible?"

Ginny could feel her eyes widening. "I should go get Harry," she said, but Draco shook his head.

"Don't bother Potter," he said. "Just sit here with me for a minute."

Ginny hesitated. It was very hard to read Draco´s expression. In the darkness, his eyes reflected light like a cat's. Slowly, she walked over and sat down next to him on the blankets. But she didn´t want to look at him, because he had his shirt off and it gave her an odd feeling, so she stared fixedly at the nightstand instead, and said the first thing that came into her head. "Does it hurt?"

"It did when I was asleep," he said. "It doesn´t anymore." He was looking down at his shirt now; the front of which was stained dark crimson. There was blood on his hands as well. Ginny looked at

them curiously, noticing something odd. He had nearly the same hands as Harry - the same shape, the same bitten nails, the same long fingers and sharp articulation of bones. She had looked at Harry's hands often enough and with enough attention to have memorized them; she would have known them anywhere. The matching scars only added to the strangeness.

Ginny reached out and touched the scar on his left palm. "How did you and Harry get these?"

Draco looked at her. "Ron didn't tell you?"

She shook her head.

Draco went back to looking at his shirt. "Accident with a sharp deck of playing cards," he said. "We don't like to talk about it. Too painful."

Ginny made a face. "Do you know what the thing I hate about you is, Malfoy?"

He glanced up at grinned. "I am shocked," he said. "Shocked that there is only one thing you hate about me. I would have thought you had a list of thousands of grievances, possibly numbered."

Ginny suddenly felt her face twitch into a smile, and was horrified. Why was she smiling at Draco Malfoy? This was bad. It suddenly occurred to her how this might look to Ron if he came in suddenly - she was kneeling on the floor with a shirtless Draco Malfoy amid a tangle of sheets and blankets, and they were smiling at each other as if they were old friends.

"I'm getting Harry," she said hastily, and got to her feet, smoothing her nightdress down.

"Don't," he said. "It's not that important."

"You're bleeding phantom blood," said Ginny. "I think this is worth waking Harry up for."

"Forget it," said Draco, and his tone brooked no argument. "Just get me another shirt, will you?"

"A shirt?" echoed Ginny, in disbelief.

"A shirt. You've got a lot of brothers, there must be plenty of clothes in this house."

Ginny tightened her lips into a narrow line, stalked out of the room, and returned with an object which she tossed into Draco's lap. It was one of Mrs. Weasley's famous sweaters.

"Pink," he said morosely, glaring at it. "I hate pink."

"Good night, Malfoy," said Ginny, and shut the door behind her.



Ginny and Ron were already awake when Harry came down to breakfast the next morning. He was wearing one of the green sweaters that Mrs. Weasley had made for him years ago; it was too small on him now and the sleeves rode up over his thin wrists. He flopped down into the chair next to Ginny, picked up a spoon, and poked listlessly at the bowl of oatmeal that she slid across the table to him. Ron looked up briefly and nodded; he was busy reading the Daily Prophet.

"Any news?" asked Harry.

"Dementors are still missing," said Ron, around a mouthful of toast. "There were some reports of them being spotted near a wizarding town to the south, but those were discredited." He snorted. "By Percy. It's always Percy, isn't it?"

Ginny shuddered. "Imagine seeing Dementors right in your own town," she said. "In your own front garden..."

They all looked anxiously out the window.

"Ginny, don't," said Ron, irritably.

But Ginny had thought of something else she wanted to talk about. "Harry," she said. "There's something wrong with Malfoy."

Ron and Harry glanced at her curiously. She was buttering a piece of toast and looking determined.

"Something more than what's usually wrong with him?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Ginny firmly. "Last night he was screaming so loudly in his sleep that it woke me up. I've never heard anyone scream like that before. And then, when I went into his bedroom, he was lying on the floor and there was blood all over his shirt."

"He was bleeding?" said Harry.

"You went into his bedroom?" said Ron, looking suddenly alarmed.

"Yes, and yes," said Ginny. "But the bedroom part is not the point of the story. The screaming and the blood, that would be the point of the story." She shuddered. "I do know what Dark magic feels like," she said, more quietly. "And it's all over him."

"Did you stay in the bedroom with him?" asked Ron.

"Ron, are you listening to me at all?" snapped Ginny.

"You did, didn't you?" said Ron, looking horrified. "Ginny! *Malfoy*?"

"I kind of like the sound of that," said his sister, with a sadistic grin. "Ginny Malfoy."

"Ginny," spluttered Ron. "I want you to tell me right now - promise me - you won't -you wouldn't - not with Malfoy!"

Ginny took a bite of toast and shrugged. "Alas, that our love must be secret," she said.

"Ginny, stop winding Ron up," said Harry, although he was hiding a smile. "Ron, quit being a twit. I'm sure Ginny didn't stay in the room with Malfoy any longer than she had to. Ginny, what do you mean there's Dark Magic all over him? Is he all right?"

Ginny frowned. "It's just a feeling," she said. "Ever since we were in the Chamber of Secrets, I get this cold sort of feeling whenever I'm around Dark magic. I got it from Hermione in Diagon Alley just after she saw Viktor. And I get it from Malfoy, too."

"Well, that's not too surprising," said Ron. "I mean, he's been around Dark magic his whole life. He's a walking Knockturn Alley."

"Maybe," said Harry, who was biting on one knuckle, something he did when he was thinking.

'D'you think he's dangerous?" asked Ron, sounding hopeful.

Somewhat unwillingly, Harry thought of the sword, the Talisman of Purest Evil. And of the surge of cold that had come from Draco's hand when they had performed the Veritas curse on Krum.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Still," said Ron, reaching for the plate of toast, "there's a definite possibility that he's a vicious, cold-blooded -" Ginny squeaked. Ron glanced up and saw Draco standing in the doorway, wearing Mrs. Weasleys' fuzzy pink sweater and carrying a large green book. "Oh. Um...piece of toast?" said Ron lamely, offering the plate to Draco.

"I've been called a lot of things in my life," said Draco, looking at the plate. "But never a vicious, cold-blooded piece of toast."

Ron had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Malfoy," he muttered. "But Ginny-"

"Told you about last night," said Draco, looking at Ginny with a certain coldness. Ginny looked right back. He had been right about pink, thought Ginny. It was not his color. It went badly with his light coloring and silvery hair, making him resemble nothing so much as an iced pink birthday cake. "I had a nightmare," he said. "So what?"

"I have nightmares all the time," said Harry. "I don't usually wake up covered in blood."

"Covered is kind of strong," said Draco, sitting down at the table. "More like...splattered."

"Oh, right," said Ron with heavy sarcasm, "Never mind then, it isn't weird at all."

"Exactly," said Draco, ignoring Ron's look of immense irritation, and turned to Harry. "Potter," he said. "I've had an idea." He waved his hand at Ron, who looked as if he was about to say something. "And no sarcastic comments, please."

"Okay," said Harry. "What?"

"The Epicyclical Charm," said Draco. "My Epicyclical Charm. It's never been tested, but theoretically, wherever I am in the world, Hermione can find me by using it. I know she could find me wherever I was at Hogwarts, she used it a couple of times."

"But that's only useful if she's trying to find you," said Harry. "Not the other way around."

"If there's only one Epicyclical Charm, that's true," said Draco. He raised the green book he was holding, the object he had Summoned to himself the night before. It was his father's copy of *Epicyclical*

Elaborations of Sorcery. "But if we make another Charm, the two Charms can find each other."

Harry, Ron and Ginny stared at him. "Another Epicyclical Charm?" said Harry faintly. "But isn't that really complicated and dangerous?"

"Not really," said Draco. "I'm a little too old for it to be very effective, but it should be effective enough for this. And I'll be giving a part of myself willingly, so that will help."

"Does that mean we get to knock out one of your teeth?" asked Ron, with interest.

"I was thinking of a lock of hair," said Draco, "and I'd like to see you try it, Weasley."

"Ahem," said Harry. "Do we have what we need for the spell?"

"Not everything," Draco hedged. "Not yet. We need some mugwort, some wolfsbane, and an Orb of Thessala."

"A what of what?" said Ginny.

"An Orb of Thessala," said Draco. "It's used in Transfiguration and Transformation spells. It has to do with soul transference. It's not hard to use, just hard to come by. I assume my dad must have had one, but I've no idea where he might have kept it."

"So where are we going to get one?" said Harry. "Is this the sort of thing you can just buy in Diagon Alley?"

"Actually, no," said Draco. "But it's just the sort of thing our Transformations teacher would have in his office."

"Lupin," said Harry. "He'd never let us borrow something like that."

"True," Draco agreed. "Which is why we're going to have to break in and take it. We have to go back to school anyway, and while we're there -"

Harry blinked. "We have to go back to school?"

"Of course," said Draco, as if this should be obvious. "We have to get my sword."

Harry pushed his chair back from the table with a screech. "No way," he said flatly. "We are not bringing that thing with us."

Draco's gray eyes spat angry sparks. "Why not?"

"Because," said Harry, as if this should be obvious. "It's evil. It's an evil thing and I don't want it near me."

"It's a very powerful weapon," said Draco. "It has powers we can't even imagine."

"Yeah," agreed Harry. "Because they're really, really horrible."

"You don't know that," said Draco firmly. "Even Lupin doesn't know that. He said he had to finish testing it. It's a Magid blade," Draco added, "and I'm a Magid and it belonged to my ancestors, it's been in my family for generations, and I want it."

Harry suddenly heard Hermione's voice in his head, remembering something she had said to him two weeks ago--was it only two weeks? Didn't Dumbledore tell you that people want what's worst for them?

Yes, Harry had replied. But not everyone.

"Malfoy..." he began. But Draco had stood up from the table and was glaring at all of them, flushed with anger. "Look," he said. "I don't know what we're up against, and neither do you. But if what we've seen so far is any indication, we're dealing with some serious, serious Dark magic. This sword is a gift, Potter. It can kill anything. The Dark Lord himself could be destroyed by it. Lupin as much as said so."

Now Harry looked angry. "Don't you remember the book?" he

snapped. "You can bear that sword, but *at a price*."

"I'm a Malfoy," said Draco. "We don't ask about prices." He grinned without much mirth. "I can afford it."

"I don't think you can," said Harry.

Ginny looked from one of them to the other. Draco and Harry were staring at each other, Draco with fiery red spots of anger on his cheeks and Harry very pale.

"What if you're not the one who pays the price, Malfoy?" said Harry in a deadly voice. "What if it turns out to be someone else? What if it turns out to be -" He almost said "*Hermione*," but he didn't want to be like Draco, didn't want to invoke Hermione's name as a whip to beat his opponent with. "-me?" he finished.

Draco's eyes were glittering. "I'll take that chance," he said.

This time it was Ron who spoke. "You're a bastard, Malfoy," he said flatly.

Draco didn't look at him, was still looking only at Harry. "What if she's in danger and the sword's our only chance to get to her?" he said. "Are you willing to take the risk that something might happen to her that we could have prevented if you hadn't been so squeamish?"

Harry's hands were gripping the table tightly, and when he spoke it was with an effort. "*Squeamish*," he echoed bleakly. "I hope you remember telling me this somewhere down the line when you've gotten one of us killed."

For a moment, nobody spoke. Then Draco said, without looking at Harry, "If you don't trust me, maybe you want to go on without me," and there was something about the way he said it that was both wistful and angry at the same time. Ginny doubted he knew he sounded wistful at all; if he had, he probably wouldn't have said anything.

"I don't trust you, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. "But I don't want to go without you either."

Draco's shoulders collapsed a little with relief.

Harry looked down at his scarred hand, then back up at Draco. "If what we did to Krum is any indication, the powers we have together are much more than what have alone. Maybe you're right about using every means at hand."

"I am right," said Draco, but he looked relieved all the same. The atmosphere of tension was fading as rapidly as it had appeared. "You'll see," he said to Harry. "We're going to go back to school and get that sword, and then we're going to go after Hermione."

He straightened up, and spoke with cold determination. "I don't care what I have to do; I don't care if it's the Dark Lord himself who's got her -- if he's done anything to hurt her, anything at all, I'll grind him up into a powder so fine we can use it for instant soup mix."

Draco paused. Harry, Ginny and Ron were all staring at him with peculiar expressions.

"Okay," he said. "That was just kind of gross, wasn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Soup just isn't that scary, Malfoy."

"Other than that, it was a good speech," interjected Ginny encouragingly.

"I still think I'm right about this," said Draco, although a great deal of the fierceness had gone out of his expression.

"And I still think you're mad," said Harry. "And maybe evil. But you're obviously very determined, and I kind of admire that." He smiled. The first time he had smiled all day. "It suits you, Malfoy."

"It does," agreed Ginny, rather unexpectedly. "But that sweater definitely does not."

"Look, Ron," said Ginny, with a grin. "Essence of Malfoy. It's magenta."

She poked the potion simmering in the cauldron with her wand, and glanced around at Ron. He was sitting on the end of Harry's bed, not-very-industriously crushing beetle shells for the potion with a mortar and pestle and trying not to yawn. They had gone straight from breakfast to their broomsticks, and had arrived at Harry and Draco's school while it was still fairly early in the morning. All four of their broomsticks were now propped against the wall next to Harry's bed.

Draco and Harry themselves, taking Harry's father's invisibility cloak just in case, had already crept off downstairs to raid Lupin's office. Ginny had wanted to ask what they were going to do if Lupin turned out to be *in* his office, then changed her mind. That, she figured, was their lookout. Potion-making, however, was her lookout. She had always been good at it at school, and this one was surprisingly simple.

The difficult part would come later, since the Epicyclical process was a moderately complex combination of a Potion, a Charm, and a Transfiguration spell. At the moment, the potion, which was the first step, was missing several key ingredients, although had some of Draco's blood in it, and the Charm would eventually be made with his hair. (He had given her a lock of it for the purpose, so fine and silvery that it hardly looked like human hair at all.)

"That's not magenta," said Ron, looking up with another huge yawn. "That's fuchsia. And quite horrible-looking it is."

"Ron, you have to crush the beetles, not just swat at them," scolded Ginny.

"I can't be arsed," said Ron glumly. "I can't help feeling like this is all for Malfoy's benefit. And I still hate his guts, whatever Harry says."

Ginny sighed. "It's for Hermione's benefit, Ron," she said. "Why don't you give me a turn with the beetle-smashing and you can stir the potion? You look done in, anyway."

Ron agreed amicably enough, and they traded places just as the bedroom door opened and Harry and Draco, looking very vexed indeed, stalked in.

"He's there!" said Harry, throwing up his hands in disgust. "Why is he there? Shouldn't he be teaching class?"

"Bastard," said Ron. "What's he doing hanging around his own office?"

Harry was biting his knuckle thoughtfully. "We need to lure him out of there," he said. "But how? If one of us does it, he'll just think we're trying to sneak in there to get the sword. And," he added, "he'll be right."

Draco stopped pacing. "I'm getting an idea," he said. "Oh, now I'm getting another one."

Ron, turning to look at him curiously, jogged the side of the cauldron, splashing some of the liquid in it onto the floor.

"And now I'm just annoyed," said Draco. "Weasley, keep your oafish hands away from that potion. That's my soul you're messing about with, you know. It's my life essence, it's my being, it's--"

"A fabulous new cleaning product!" announced Ron, looking down. Where the potion had fallen, it had eaten a hole right through the rug, and partway into the stone beneath. "I've never seen anything like it. It's completely toxic."

They all stared curiously.

"I refuse to consider this as a reflection on my personality," said Draco, looked at the charred rug.

"And that's your prerogative," said Harry. "Now, what was your

idea?"

Draco gave him a look of great amusement. "You´ll find out, Potter," he said, heading for the door. "Just hang on, I´ll be right back."

Fleur had a room to herself at school; at the moment, it was full of impossibly tiny, impossibly delicate, brightly colored butterflies that she had conjured up to amuse herself. As soon as Draco walked in, fifteen blue butterflies settled in his hair, and several pink ones on his shoulders.

"Oh," said Fleur, looking at him mistily. "How adorable."

With an effort, Draco restrained himself from screaming *Get these sodding butterflies off me!* "I need you to do me a favor," he said instead, looking earnestly at Fleur, who sat with her legs stretched out in front of her on her bed, tapping each of her toenails with her long silvery wand and turning them various shades of pink. "I need you to lure Professor Lupin out of his office. Just for a few minutes," he added, seeing her dubious look. "Come on, I thought you fancied him."

"I did," said Fleur, turning her left big toenail mauve. "But I have since reconsidered. 'E is very 'andsome, but just a bit too stodgy."

Draco bit his lip in frustration. "Fleur, the man's a werewolf. How stodgy can he be?"

"'E is boring," said Fleur, firmly. "'E is boring and stuffy and English. Not like you," she added quickly. "You are English boy with French instincts," she grinned. "And veela blood. You are not boring. But Lupin, he fills me with *ennui*."

"That's just his teaching persona," Draco said, hoping he sounded like he knew what he was talking about. "Stodgy by day, perhaps, but at night it's booze, whores and flying fur."

Fleur wrinkled up her petite nose in a frown. "I do not believe you,"

she said.

"Come on, Fleur. Do it for me," he said, wincing inwardly. Lord only knew what she'd want in exchange. "Please?"

She gave him a very considering look, then stood up, tossing back her long, silvery hair. "All right," she said, a little sulkily. "I do it for you. But you --" she lightly struck his shoulder with her hand, letting it rest there perhaps a moment longer than she needed to, "You owe me, Draco Malfoy."



"Are you sure this is a good idea?" said Harry, sounding very doubtful.

Draco shifted uncomfortably under the invisibility cloak. Large as it was, it was a deal of trouble to keep all four of them covered as they waited in the hallway. "Why wouldn't it be?" he said.

"Well," said Harry, "either it doesn't work, in which case we're in trouble, or it does work, in which case ..."

"In which case Lupin gets some action," said Draco. "We're doing him a favor, really. It's fine."

"It is NOT fine," said Ron, his disembodied voice sounding cranky.

"Why not?"

"Because he's really, really old and it's nasty," said Ron, firmly.

"He's not *that* old," said Ginny.

The cloak rustled as Harry, Ron and Draco tried to turn to look at Ginny, before realizing this was impossible. Harry was fairly sure, however, from the tone of her voice, that she was smiling.

"He's not," she insisted.

"Ginny," said Ron warningly.

"He's kind of attractive, actually," she said.

"Can we go back to talking about Dementors in the front yard?" said Ron. "Because this is freaking me out."

At that moment, Fleur came around the corner. She had put on a formfitting silver robe, and gave a wink in their general direction as she paused at Lupin's door and knocked. They saw her open the door and thrust her head in. Whatever she said was inaudible, but in a short time, Lupin came to the door, looking both distracted and faintly surprised. "Why can't we talk about your homework in my office?" he said, stepping outside and shutting the door behind him.

"It is just so much more pleasant to walk as we talk," said Fleur, laying her hand on his arm.

"If you say so," said Lupin, sounding extremely dubious.

"As anyone ever told you that you are a very good teacher?" asked Fleur, using her grip on Lupin's arm to steer him down the corridor.

"Oh, yes, I get told that all the time," he said, as he unknowingly passed Ron, Draco, Harry and Ginny in the hall.

"´ As anyone ever told you that you are also very attractive?"

"Well, Dumbledore told me that once, but it was after the New Year's staff party and he was a bit squiffy on butterbeer..."

Lupin's voice faded, and they were gone.

Although he couldn't see their faces, all around him Harry could feel the other three shaking with laughter. Even Ron was laughing. It was like being caught in a mini-earthquake. "Shh," he hissed, trying to keep from laughing himself. "Shh, wait until we get into the office..."

Once inside the office, Harry tore the invisibility cloak off them, allowing Draco, who was now nearly crying with laughter, to collapse onto the desk. "I almost love Fleur," he said finally, regaining his composure. "´ As anyone told you that you are also very attractive?´ "

Ginny was shaking her head. "The poor man, he really doesn't deserve that kind of abuse."

"It's for a good cause, Ginny," said Ron, grinning. Whatever minor pangs of jealousy he might have been feeling over Fleur seemed to have vanished. "Hey, Malfoy," he added. "What're you doing?"

"Getting our ingredients," said Draco, who was now crouching on the floor next to Lupin's bookcase. "It's here...got it." He pulled out a small blue vial, unstopped the cap, sniffed it, and made a face. "Wolfsbane," he said, and handed it up to Harry, who squinted at it and passed it on to Ginny. "Mugwort we've got upstairs...And here it is...the Orb of Thessala."

"That's a snow globe, Malfoy," said Harry. "Nice try."

The nymph in the globe winked at Draco as he put her down.

"Sorry," he said, and continued rummaging. "Right," he said, after a few moments. "Got it."

And he handed something up to Harry - something that looked like a black glass tennis ball.

"You´re sure?" said Harry, looking at Draco hard.

"If it´s not an Orb of Thessala, I´m the one that gets blown up," said Draco. "So yes, I´m sure."

"Blown up?" echoed Ginny, looking very pale as Harry handed her the Orb.

Draco waved a hand airily. "That hardly ever happens," he said. "Just finish the spell right and we´ll all be fine."

Ginny looked up at Ron, who was looking equally nervous. "I don´t know..."

"Just do it," said Draco, who was now looking under Lupin´s desk. "And fast. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible. Why don´t you two go on back to our room and we´ll meet you there in a few minutes. Take the invisibility cloak." He popped his head up over the desk, saw the three of them preparing to leave, and hastily added, "Potter. You stay here with me."

Harry paused. "All right," he said, stepping back into the office. Ron and Ginny turned to look at him; he shrugged, and they drew the cloak up over themselves, vanishing from sight.

The office door opened and closed behind them, and Harry turned back to Draco, who was emerging from underneath Lupin´s desk, carrying the adamantine case that held Slytherin´s sword. There was a bright light in his eyes, and Harry felt a vague stab of apprehension run through him.

"Come on, Potter," said Draco. "Help me get this thing open."

"I thought the Dark Mark was Voldemort´s symbol," said Hermione,

looking at Wormtail. She had decided that there was no point in not saying Voldemort's name, considering that she had somehow managed to get herself kidnapped by the one wizard in history who had been even worse.

Slytherin, who seemed to have no use for a wand (*of course not*, she thought, *he's a Magid, just like Harry*) had bound her arm to Wormtail's and ordered them both to follow him out of the room. They were currently all three walking down a long stone corridor, towards what destination, Hermione could only imagine. Slytherin walked ahead, of course, and she and Wormtail followed behind.

"He didn't invent it," said Wormtail, who was looking very smug. "It belonged first to Slytherin. Almost everything the Dark Lord ever did was borrowed from Slytherin."

"You're sounding awfully smug," said Hermione. "Aren't you worried that Voldemort will be angry with you for betraying him?"

"No," said Wormtail, his smirk stretching into a very unattractive leer. "Slytherin is twice as powerful as Voldemort was even in his prime. The old order cometh again, and the new order passeth away," he added, and giggled. "If you haven't noticed," he went on, "history is repeating itself. There's no point fighting it. All this was foretold. Dumbledore knows it. Why do you think he -"

He broke off, as Salazar Slytherin halted and turned to look at them. His skeletal face was expressionless. They had come to the end of the hallway, which opened out into a large round room hung with tapestries. "Wormtail," said Slytherin, his buzzing voice echoing off the stone walls. "Please wait for us farther down the hallway. I wish to show something to my guest." He waved a hand at Hermione, and the ropes tying her to Wormtail vanished. "Come here," he said to her, and she did, dimly aware of Wormtail walking away.

"I wanted you to see this," said Slytherin, pointing at the largest of the tapestries hanging against the far wall. "Maybe it will help you understand."

The tapestry showed four figures standing together under a woven

archway. They were young. In their twenties, at most. They faced Hermione, smiling, as if they were posing for a photograph. The man on the left she knew immediately. There was a portrait of him hanging in the Gryffindor common room. Tall and handsome with black hair and a black beard, dressed in gold and scarlet. Godric Gryffindor, looking a great deal like Harry.

Then there was a round, red-haired woman who looked friendly and kind and wore robes of yellow. She reminded Hermione strongly of Mrs. Weasley. Of course, she was Helga Hufflepuff.

Then there was another man. He wasn't as tall as Godric, and he looked like he knew it. He had black hair as well, and a fierce scowl appeared on his mouth. If he hadn't been scowling, he might have been handsome too. He wore black and silver, and snakes carved from silver metal wound up and down each of his arms. His eyes were silver, too. He was the one Wormtail had called the greatest of the Hogwarts Four. He didn't look like someone aware of his own greatness. He looked desperately unhappy.

But it was the fourth woman in the tapestry who had caught Hermione's attention. She stood between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and she wore robes of dark blue. In her hands she carried several books, and her extremely curly hair was knotted in braids around her head. There was an ink stain on her cheek, and it didn't look like a flaw in the tapestry. She was pretty, although not extraordinarily so, but she looked somehow very...alive. *Does she look like me?* thought Hermione wonderingly. *A little*, she conceded. Certainly they were not dead ringers for each other. Rowena Ravenclaw's eyes were blue. But there was something. There was definitely *something*.

Of course, that didn't make Salazar Slytherin -- or what was left of him -- any less mad.

He looked down at her and she saw the Dark Mark tattoos standing out livid and horrible on his fleshless face. She wanted to shudder, but it wasn't the same sort of shudder that Voldemort had inspired in her. Salazar Slytherin was quite horrible, and by all accounts had been evil beyond belief, and there was no doubt that he terrified

her. And yet Hermione found that she felt, somehow...sorry for him.

Not much. But a little.

"Now," he said. "I want to tell you a story."



Draco pushed his sweaty hair out of his eyes and cursed under his breath. So far the adamantine case had yielded to none of their blandishments. Draco had tried Opening Spells, Smashing Hexes, and had even attempted to perform Crushing Charms with both himself and Harry holding the wand at the same time. Nothing had happened. Draco had wanted to try a Whirlwind Charm, but Harry pointed out that these couldn't be controlled very well and that he

might well blast them both out the window.

So Draco had given up on trying to open the case magically and had started trying to break it in half by bashing it against the stone walls. This had done nothing except give him a sharp pain in his wrists. Furious, he had thrown the case on the ground and started jumping up and down on it with both feet, cursing.

When he finally looked up, panting, Harry was grinning at him.

"What?" said Draco irritably. "What is it?"

"You look ridiculous," said Harry, shaking his head.

Draco paused, looking thoughtful. "Do I?"

"It's all right," said Harry. "Not much else makes me laugh these days."

Draco stopped jumping and looked at Harry with a very peculiar expression. "Do I make you laugh?"

Harry shrugged. "It's nothing to get all excited about, Malfoy."

"It's just -" Draco sighed. "I feel guilty."

"Guilty?" said Harry uneasily. "What about?"

Draco got down off the case, reached down to pick it up, and approached Harry, looking extremely anxious. "Potter," he said, "There's something I've got to tell you."

Harry looked at him in surprise. Draco was holding the case clutched against his chest as if it was a baby, and his eyes were enormous and pained. Harry had never in his life seen an expression like that on Draco's face. He looked as if he had swallowed a nail. "Wha-what do you have to tell me, Malfoy?" he said. "Are you all right? Are you dying? What?"

"It's about Hermione," said Draco. "I'm just - you've been so, well,

trusting about Hermione and I being friends, and I've started to feel guilty. I mean, it wasn't anything really, it was just that once -"

Harry goggled at him. "Just that once WHAT?"

Draco looked acutely embarrassed. "Come on, Potter, don't make me spell it out."

"No," said Harry, very coldly. "Spell it out. Spell it out, Malfoy. Because I don't understand."

"Look," said Draco, "it was just that once, I think she really felt bad about it afterwards. You know, it doesn't mean she doesn't love you."

"If you're saying what I think you're saying," said Harry in clipped tones, "I don't believe you." He shrugged. "I just don't."

"Really?" said Draco, smiling, catlike. "Then why isn't your little lie detector going off? Your...Sneakoscope?"

Harry looked down wildly. It was true. The Sneakoscope was completely silent.

"Sorry, Potter," said Draco. "These things happen."

"Sorry?" said Harry in a strangled voice. "*Sorry?* Is that all you have to say? Why didn't - why didn't one of you tell me?"

Draco shrugged. "We just couldn't agree on how to break it to you," he said. "Eventually Hermione decided you were just better off not knowing. Maybe she was right," he added, looking at Harry dubiously. "You don't seem to be taking it all that well..."

Black spots were dancing in front of Harry's vision. He could remember being so angry only a few times before in his life, usually at Voldemort. He's lying, he told himself - *but then why didn't the Sneakoscope go off?* - Hermione wouldn't do that - *but then why didn't the Sneakoscope go off?* - I always thought I would be the first - the only - this explains why she's been writing to him all this

time, a letter a day, I knew it wasn't *normal* --

"Hey," said Draco, and his voice sounded like it was coming from very far away. "Remember, Potter. Control, control control ---"

BANG!

The snow globe on the desk burst like a bomb, spraying water and bits of synthetic silver snow all over Lupin's papers. The nymph inside the snow globe screamed. Draco grinned as the windows cracked, and the wineglass on the table shattered into shards. Let him be angry enough, he prayed. Let him be angry enough -

CRACK!

And Draco ducked his head as the adamantine case in his arms fissured and split in half with a sound like rending bones. *It worked!* He dropped the case, and the sword with it, letting the fragments of adamantine shower to the floor around him like hail, and seized hold of the front of Harry's shirt.

"I'm lying!" he shouted, over the sound of shattering glass and howling wind. "*I'm lying!*"

Harry looked at him wildly. "You're what?"

"I'm lying! Of course I'm lying! Now stop it!"

"You're just scared," said Harry, narrowing his eyes as a paperweight flew across the room and thunked into the wall beside Draco's head. Draco got the distinct impression that Harry was in some way enjoying the havoc he was wreaking.

"Don't be an idiot!" howled Draco. "You think if I slept with Hermione I wouldn't have been gloating about it way before now? And when would we have had the time? You two are always

together. Be logical, Potter!"

"What about my Sneakoscope?" shouted Harry stubbornly. "Why didn't it go off?"

"Because it's in your jacket upstairs!" yelled Draco. "*Pillock!*"

There was a sudden silence, broken only by the faint tinkle of the last bits of broken glass settling on the floor, and the tiny, furious voice of the nymph in the snow globe cursing at both of them. Harry didn't hear it; he was looking at Draco, shocked. "But why--?" He followed Draco's gaze down to the floor of Lupin's office, now covered with water, shredded bits of paper, and shards of broken casing. The sword lay at Draco's feet; gleaming and silver as it had been the night that they had found it. Draco bent down and picked it up in his left hand, curling his fingers around the hilt. He raised it and held it out, showing it to Harry, who stared at it. "Oh," said Harry, as realization dawned. "*Oh.*" He looked wearily at Draco. "You miserable bastard," he said, but there wasn't much energy in it. "You couldn't have thought of some other way?"

"Sorry," said Draco unrepentantly. "You said before we should use whatever means were to hand."

Harry shook his head. "I hate making things easy for you," he said. "I really hate it."

"Like taking candy from a baby," said Draco, grinning, then looked down at his hands, which were bleeding, shot through with bits of broken adamant from the shattered case. "Well," he amended, "a very large, very angry baby."

"I'm way too tired to start beating on you, Malfoy," said Harry calmly. "But rest assured I'll get you back for this."

Draco couldn't tell whether he was kidding or not. "I'll look forward to it," he replied. "Now come on, let's get out of here before Lupin gets away from Fleur and comes back." He shuddered. "Or worse, they come back together."

When they returned to their dormitory room, they found Ron and Ginny kneeling on the floor next to the cauldron. Ginny was carefully removing something from it. She turned, hearing them enter, and gestured them over.

The Charm she had made was nowhere near as beautiful or as deadly-looking as the one that Lucius had created. This one was a bit lopsided, not so much a perfect circle as something of an oblong. Draco eyed it dubiously.

"It's not done yet," said Ginny. "Here." She thrust it at Draco. "You hold it. I've got to do the last bit of the spell."

He held the Charm in his hand while she pointed her wand at it. A long tendril of red hair fell down over her face as she began to speak, and she impatiently brushed it aside. *"Ullus res muta. Anima irreti. Sanguinum ad vitrum transmuta!"*

There was a flash of light, and the Charm flipped over in Draco's hand.

"It's done," said Ginny.

Draco stood up, looking at the Charm, which, like the other one, was transparent, although this one held a lock of his hair instead of a tooth. *Now there are two objects in the world that could kill me instantly*, he thought grimly. *Hermione has the first one. Who in my life do I trust enough to give this one to?*

He could feel the eyes of the other three on him as he walked toward the window, holding out the Charm in front of him, and paused there, looking out. Then he shut his eyes, letting everything fall away as he had learned to do when he was a child, locked in the wardrobe in his bedroom. He could feel the charm beating in his hand like a tiny heart, and although he knew it was no more than his own pulse that he sensed, he concentrated on it, holding the

charm, tightly, tightly...

A round tower surrounded by trees. The walls were ancient stone, and black in places, as if the tower once had burned. There were no birds. Images in quick succession: a bare room with straw on the floor, a man with a hand made of silver, a hallway lined with tapestries, and Hermione, her dark eyes frantic with worry, looking at him.

Where are you? Where are you?

He opened his eyes, turned, and met Harry's steady gaze across the room.

"South," he said. "We go south."

References: "I've been called a lot of things in my life," said Draco, looking at the plate. "But never a vicious, cold-blooded piece of toast." [B]This line is, very famously, from Buffy: "I may be a cold-blooded jelly doughnut but I have impeccable timing."

"He must not have been reading his Evil Overlord handbook," grinned Sirius. "Rule 54: 'I will not strike a bargain with a demonic being, then attempt to double-cross it simply because I feel like being contrary.' From The Evil Overlord List!

""You must at least believe that there is a natural balance to all things," said the demon. "For every profit in one thing, payment in some other thing. You will profit greatly by the use of this sword, but first it must be paid for." -- This speech is an altered version of Pluto's speech to Orpheus in the play of the same name by Ted Hughes. From Orpheus:

"Nothing is free. Everything has to be paid for. For every profit in one thing, payment in some other thing. For every life, a death. Even your music, of which we have heard so much, that had to be paid for. Your wife was the payment for your music. Hell is now satisfied."

Orb of Thessala: This is an actual mythical object. It was referenced on Buffy, so I'll mention it here.

"I had a flashback in the middle of a delusion." Red Dwarf "That's just his teaching persona," Draco said, hoping he sounded like he knew what he was talking about. "Stodgy by day, perhaps, but at night it's booze, whores and flying fur." Buffy. From the episode "The Dark Age", regarding Giles.

Draco Sinister

Chapter Four - Dragon and Glass

As they flew, Draco discovered that the Epicyclical Charm worked a bit like a compass. Every twenty miles or so he would have to pause and reattune it, and the others would stop and watch, hovering in midair.

Because he was the navigator, he flew ahead, with the others following him: Harry second, then Ginny and Ron behind. He was actually quite enjoying the flying. They had been flying low over a thickly wooded area for several hours, just skimming the tops of the trees, and the pull coming from the Epicyclical Charm had been growing stronger and stronger. When, after another hour, he paused and touched the Charm again, images came to him in a surge like a tidal wave: the forest, the burned castle, the round tower. And Hermione. He felt almost sure that the forest in the visions was the same forest they were flying over now.

He looked over at Harry, Ron and Ginny, who were hovering a little ways away, and felt just a bit smug. *There's no way they could do this without me. Not even the great Harry Potter.*

He was about to call out to them that he was sure they were getting close, when a flicker of movement below him caught his eye and he glanced down. And stared in surprise. It was difficult to see through the thick canopy of interwoven branches, but Draco thought he saw a line of dark figures, like a column of ants, wending their way between the trees. Were they people? It looked like much too orderly a column for animals -- but it was hard to tell.

Draco leaned forward, trying to get a better look. And froze, as a searing wave of cold suddenly washed over him. He jerked upright, but the cold didn't vanish -- it was cold like no cold he had ever experienced, cold that burned and slashed at his insides like knives. Suddenly terrified, he tried to yell out for Harry, but he couldn't

hear his own voice over the voices that suddenly began shouting in his head.

You're not my son. That was his father speaking, of course it was his father.

I am still young; I can have other children.

Draco clutched at his broom. I don't care, he said stubbornly to his father, I don't care, but Lucius Malfoy's voice was suddenly swept aside by a rising and howling tide of other voices, voices he didn't know. Voices screaming in pain, choked off in blood, voices he remembered from his dreams, crying out in agony...and a man's voice, rising above them all, hoarse and angry, *You lied to me! You lied to me!*

I never lied to you! A woman's voice, shouting her reply: *You just believed it because it was what you wanted to believe!*

You'll be sorry you ever said that. Don't think I won't hurt you. Nobody can hurt you like I can.

No! NO! The unknown woman was screaming now. *What have you done to him? Where is he? Salazar, what have you done?*

Draco covered his ears, but the screaming went on inside his head, and worse than the screaming was the terror, pure terror washing over him like a thick black fog. Icy fingers of cold gripped him, prying his hands from the handle of his broomstick, pushing him over backwards. He saw the world turn upside down, the sky at his feet, and then, as he fell, everything went black.

"Harry? Harry! Everything all right?"

Harry glanced up to see Ron looking at him with concern.

"I think so," said Harry, aware that he probably looked pale and unhappy. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear there were Dementors

around." He slowed his broom to a halt, put his hands up to his face, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes.

Ron paused beside him, and a moment later, so did Ginny. Harry shuddered. "I feel so - cold," he said.

Ron shook his head. "I don't feel anything."

"Neither do I," chipped in Ginny. Harry put his glasses back on. "It's probably -" He broke off, looking surprised. "Malfoy!" he called. "You all right?"

Both Ron and Ginny turned to follow Harry's gaze, just in time to see Draco, who was bent double over his Firebolt as if he were about to be sick, let go of his broomstick and topple sideways. As they watched in horror, he tumbled downwards, vanishing into the treetops, his broom hurtling after him. Ginny gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, and spun to look at Harry - but Harry was already gone. Pointing his broomstick directly at the ground as if he were diving into the Wronski Feint, he shot downwards through the trees, vanishing from sight.

Without another thought, Ginny made as if to dive after him, but Ron clamped a hand on her wrist. "Ginny, no-"

"Ron, we've got to go after them-"

"Yes," he said patiently, "but neither of us is Harry, we can't fly like Harry. You'll get yourself killed."

With his hand still gripping her arm, he tilted his broom downward, and she followed. She soon saw what he meant. The trees were so thickly interwoven here that it necessitated some tricky flying to keep from crashing or getting tangled in the branches. She remembered the speed at which Harry had dived down, and shuddered. *Please let him be all right*, she prayed.

And Draco. Let him be all right, too.

"Let me tell you a story," Salazar Slytherin said.

Hermione looked at his face as he stared fixedly at the tapestry of the Hogwarts Four hanging on the wall. She couldn't tell if he was looking at Rowena or Godric, or even at the depiction of himself. His jaw was set.

"Rowena," he said.

Not knowing if he was talking to her, Hermione didn't move.

"We were children together," he said. "I knew her from the moment she was born. I saw her in her cradle. I was five years old. I knew her and loved her every moment of her life. I watched her as she grew in power and in wisdom. I had little magical skill myself, to speak of. Until I was fifteen years old, I was the shame of my family. It was then that I told Rowena that I loved her. And she told me she loved me as well."

Slytherin began to pace.

"It unlocked something inside me. I discovered that not only was I capable of magic, I was in fact a Magid, of unmatched power and skill. I could speak the language of beasts and animals, I could control the weather, I could perform spells without a wand. But only as long as I was with Rowena."

He glanced at Hermione, his eyes fierce and sad, and she felt again the same flicker of pity for him that she had felt earlier. *They were children together; they loved each other as children. Like Harry and me.*

But he's nothing like Harry.

"She was my Source," he said. "You might not know what that is. It is magic at its most mysterious. Without Rowena, I was more powerless than an infant. With Rowena by my side, I could have mastered the world."

"But she didn't want you to master the world," said Hermione slowly. "Did she?"

"I did everything she asked me to do," said Slytherin hoarsely. "I agreed to start the school she wanted me to start with her. I let her bring in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff as founders, although they were both fools. I did what I could to make myself stronger..." He made a noise like a hiss. "I recruited young wizards of strength and ambition, and among them I looked for one who might be a Source for me, as Rowena was. But there was never anyone, never anyone but her. And the more I needed her, the more she drew away from me. I began to see how she looked at Godric." He stopped pacing and stared at her with furious eyes. "She looked at him as, when we were children, she had looked at me. Filthy Muggle-born fool that he was, I knew why she had turned to him. It was because I was weak, because without her, I could not perform the simplest Summoning charm."

Hermione very much doubted that this was why Rowena had stopped loving Slytherin, if indeed she had, but she kept her mouth shut.

"As she withdrew her love from me, so did my strength ebb, and with it, my desperation grew. I could not bear to be weak; that she should see me as weak was intolerable to me. I did everything -- everything I could -- to make myself stronger --"

"You did Dark magic," said Hermione slowly.

"I called upon the powers of hell," said Slytherin. "I resolved that I would no longer rely upon her, that I would strengthen my power, so that I might face Godric without her by my side and she might know that I was powerful in my own right. I called upon the powers of hell and they gave me back what she had taken away from me when she left me for Godric."

"She stopped loving you because you were doing Dark magic, not because of Godric!" snapped Hermione.

"She should have loved me anyway!" he cried in his hoarse, buzzing

voice. *"As I would have loved her, regardless of anything she might have done!"*

Shaken by the fury in his face and voice, Hermione took a step backwards.

"With the power I had gained, I was invincible," Slytherin went on slowly. "I determined to show her that I had become the greatest wizard in the world. I created armies of monsters and the armies of men withered before them. I mastered the lightning and the thunder; I could have cracked the earth in half, had I so chosen. But I would not destroy a world that had her in it. I still loved her, even after all she had done to me. Eventually, I went to find her, to show her what I had made of myself and see her pride in me. But she was with Godric. She no longer loved me. She had chosen Godric over me. She told me to get out and to leave them alone."

Hermione looked at his face, followed his gaze to the tapestry, and suddenly knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, what must have happened.

"You killed him," she said, in a voice that squeaked.

"Of course I killed him."

Hermione winced, not least because in her mind, Godric Gryffindor looked more than a little like Harry.

"She must have hated you," she said savagely, and then, with an indrawn breath, "Or did you kill her, too?"

"I did not kill her," said Slytherin, turning away from the tapestry. "In the end, I could not take her life, even after all she had taken from me. I could not kill her, and yet my own life meant nothing to me. I went into seclusion, performed difficult and dangerous magics. Magics that ensured I would rise again, rise when there was another Rowena in the world, another Source to feed my power..."

"I'm not Rowena," said Hermione in a trembling voice. "She died a thousand years ago, so did Godric, and so should you have! You

should never have come back!"

Slytherin's dark and empty eyes rested on her for a moment. It almost looked as though he might smile. "But I came back for you," he said.

"Your power went away when Rowena stopped loving you," said Hermione desperately. "So the Source has to be willing."

"That's true," said Slytherin.

"Well, I'm not willing, and nothing you can do can make me willing. Even if you torture me -"

"Crude and unnecessary," said Slytherin. "And ineffective. It might break you, but it would not make you willing. No. When you become my Source, it will be out of love."

"Love?" echoed Hermione, nearly gagging. "That's just - disgusting -"

Now he did smile. "You are so much like her," he said. "And when I am done with you, you will be her. A better Rowena than ever I had, more constant and more true." He raised his head and called out, suddenly, looking past her, "Wormtail!"

In seconds, Wormtail was at his side, grinning at Hermione, his beady eyes sparkling.

"Is it time, Master?"

"Almost," said Slytherin. "Take her back to the room and lock her in. Very soon," he said. "Very soon it will be time."

Flying almost entirely by instinct, Harry shot downward, somehow - miraculously - managing to avoid impaling himself violently on a branch or crashing headfirst into a tree. He broke through the last of the branches, saw the ground careening up to meet him, and pulled up so sharply on his Firebolt that he toppled off, a foot from

the ground, the broomstick clattering to the earth next to him.

He was up on his feet in seconds, looking around. He was standing in a small clearing between tall trees. It was nearly dark down here, the dimness pierced only by a few shafts of dusty light filtering down through gaps in the leaves, but Harry's sharp Seeker's eyes immediately picked out Draco's broken broomstick, lying snapped in half in the center of the clearing. And several feet beyond it, a dark huddled shape on the ground.

Harry felt something oddly like panic. Maybe it was panic. He forced his feet to move, half-sprinting across the clearing towards Draco's crumpled form. As he got closer, he saw that the other boy was lying on his back, and for a moment, as he dropped down next to him and saw that his eyes were open, he was quite sure that Draco was dead.

Then the gray eyes flicked sideways towards him, and with a funny hitching breath, Draco said, "Hey, Potter."

Relief raced over Harry like a wave. "Malfoy - you're all right?"

"Wind knocked out of me," said Draco. He started to lift himself up on his elbows and winced. "Oh. And my leg's broken."

"Broken? Are you sure? Does it hurt?" said Harry, feeling that he sounded like a worried grandmother, but unable to help it.

Draco shot him a look. "No, it feels great," he drawled. "I was hoping you'd snap the other femur for me. Double the fun."

He really makes it difficult to feel sorry for him, thought Harry irritably. Then again, maybe that was the point.

"I heard it break," added Draco, with a shudder. "It sounded like a broomstick snapping in half."

"Speaking of which," said Harry. "Your broomstick's snapped in half."

Draco looked at him with an expression of complete and utter

horror.

"It's not that bad," said Harry quickly. "You can share with one of us until we-"

"Potter," said Draco in a strangled voice. He had gone the grayish color of unfired clay. "Look behind you."

Harry turned. And froze.

They were still quite a distance away, on the far side of the clearing. But there was no mistaking what they were, twenty or thirty dark-robed, dark-hooded creatures, twelve feet tall, trickling like slow venom out of the gaps between the trees and into the clearing. Coming closer.

Harry felt his heart turn over.

Dementors.

Draco made a choked sort of noise. Harry whipped around and saw that he had clamped both his hands over his face and was jerking and twitching like a fish on the end of a line.

"Malfoy?" said Harry, in wonder and horror, and then the first wave of cold hit him, nearly knocking him over and into Draco. He sucked in air, trying to clear the gray fog rising in his brain, and struggled to his feet, turning, facing the oncoming Dementors, trying not to stagger in the face of the wall of freezing cold they drove before them like an iceberg.

Harry was vaguely aware of Draco, still making strangled noises behind him, as he reached for his wand with fingers that felt like a bunch of numb twigs tied to his wrist. The Dementors were halfway across the clearing now, moving towards him like a steady tide of poisoned water. That they were so silent as they moved only added to Harry's sense of being trapped in a nightmare.

He attempted to steady his wand hand, which was shaking violently. Harry had never felt less able to summon up a happy memory than

he did right now. He hadn't conjured a Patronus since his third year, and the happy memories that had served him then -- Quidditch matches and House Cup victories -- suddenly seemed very small and silly. He cast his mind desperately back - and thought of course of Hermione, Hermione telling him she loved him, only right now that caused him more pain than anything else. He forced his mind away from memories of rain and mirrors and Hermione kissing him, and thought suddenly of standing by the lake at school, holding Sirius' letter in his hand and watching Hermione and Draco laughing. And remembered that their laughter had been so infectious that he had laughed himself, especially at Hermione, who laughed often enough, but rarely like that - rarely so hard that she had to sit down, rarely with such bright and uncontrollable happiness. He felt his mouth twitch into a smile as he remembered how she had pulled him down next to her and buried her face in his shoulder, still laughing.

He raised his wand, and heard his own voice as if it came from far away. "Expecto Patronum!"

His wand jerked in his hand and the familiar silver-white light burst from its tip. Shaking with relief, Harry fell to his knees as the silver light formed itself into the shape of a stag with antlers like forked lightning, which lunged silently towards the Dementors. In the dim light the silver stag shone like a new moon, and the Dementors withered back before its light, almost seeming to evaporate as they retreated into the shadow of the trees. The stag darted after them, turning at the edge of the clearing to look back around at Harry - Harry raised his hand in a weak salute - and it vanished, plunging into the forest in pursuit.

Still on his knees, Harry turned and looked at Draco, who had stopped twitching but still had his hands clamped over his face.

"They're gone," he said.

"Potter," said Draco, not taking his hands away from his face, "The sword-"

"What?"

"Take it off me - please take it off me -"

Harry reached out and grabbed the hilt of the sword, which Draco had stuck through his belt (and had miraculously failed to impale himself on while falling), and nearly yelled. It was freezing cold to the touch, like ice. He gritted his teeth and closed his hand around the hilt, pulling it away from Draco. He felt the cold that radiated from it with the force of frozen nails being driven into his veins, and yet as he lifted it in his hand he felt suddenly - powerful.

A small, cold voice spoke in the back of his head.

Harry Potter?

The sword was no longer cold. It had assumed the temperature of his skin. It seemed made of his own flesh, only harder, and more smooth.

Harry, said the voice in his head, again.

Harry dropped the sword and jumped back as if it had burned him.

"Harry!" It was Ron's voice. Harry looked up and saw Ron and Ginny coming towards them, looking pale and worried. They were both covered in leaves and twigs were caught in Ginny's hair - they must have gotten stuck in the woods. Both of them were both carrying their broomsticks. "Harry -- was that --?"

"Patronus spell," said Harry briefly. "Dementors."

Ron looked gray. "We have to get out of here," he said.

"Malfoy's leg's broken," said Harry in the same short tone.

Ron dropped his broomstick and looked from Harry to Draco. Then he turned to Ginny. "Can you fix it?"

She shook her head. "I did cuts and bruises last year-but bones, no. I don't want to risk it. If I made a mistake, I might end up giving him two bones in his leg instead of one, or making them bendy, or -"

"Removing them entirely," said Harry, thinking of Lockhart.

"Right," said Ginny.

"So that would be a no," said Ron. "Okay. Harry. Come here. I need to talk to you for a minute."

Harry followed Ron a short distance away and looked at him inquiringly. Ron had his resolute face on, which was sometimes a good thing and sometimes not. Harry admired Ron's determination, but it could be hard to get through to him when he had his mind set on something.

"You're all right?" said Ron, looking at Harry searchingly. "The Dementors and everything...you're okay?"

"I'm fine," said Harry. To his surprise, this was the truth. "They affected Malfoy a lot more than they affected me."

"Which is weird," said Ron.

"I agree," said Harry. "But I'm not sure it means anything. Scratch that. It means something, but I don't know what."

"Well, you're going to get some time to find out," said Ron.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I think Ginny and I should go find some help, and you should stay here with Malfoy. We're not leaving him alone in the woods with a broken leg, much as I dislike him, and I'm certainly not leaving him alone here with Ginny while you and I go off-"

"Even with a broken leg?" grinned Harry. "He couldn't catch her if she ran."

"What if she doesn't run?"

"You're paranoid," said Harry.

In response, Ron's eyes flicked past him. Harry turned, and saw Draco propped up against a tree trunk, Ginny bending over him, looking solicitous.

"Means nothing," said Harry.

"I'm not letting her hang around here playing nursemaid to Malfoy. Because ... well, because-"

"Because playing nursemaid leads to playing naughty stewardess?"

"*Harry*," said Ron, indignantly.

Harry threw up his hands. "You are not sane on this topic."

Ron shrugged. "I was brought up to hate the name of Malfoy and to look after my little sister. So tell me, what do you think I should do?"

"Does that hurt now?" asked Ginny anxiously, pushing a stray tendril of hair out of her eyes. She had been helping Draco sit up against a tree trunk. His broken leg lay stretched out stiffly in front of him and he held Slytherin's sword across his lap.

"Yes, it hurts," said Draco irritably. "My leg's broken. Of course it hurts. Doesn't anyone know any pain-killing charms? What's wrong with you people?"

"Do you know any?" said Ginny sharply.

"No," said Draco without a trace of embarrassment.

"God, you're annoying, even with a broken leg," she said, but she said it without rancor. "Look, just sit back, will you?" She put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back gently so that he was leaning against the tree trunk.

"Thanks," he said, and shut his eyes.

"No problem," said Ginny softly, looking at him. In a way, she was glad he had his eyes shut, because it meant she could look at him without having to look away. He was pale, probably from pain, making the livid cuts where the branches had torn at his face stand out more clearly against his skin. So did his eyelashes, which were long and dark enough to make Lavender Brown desperately jealous.

"Don't," he said, without opening his eyes.

"Don't what?" said Ginny, shrinking back guiltily.

"Look at me. It makes me nervous." He opened his eyes and studied her expression for a moment, then shut them again as if the sight of her pained him, and said flatly, "Forget it. It won't work."

Ginny was floored. "What won't work?"

He sighed. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "Same thing you were thinking last night. 'Hey, look at Malfoy, all cute and helpless and kinda nice. He's not mean; he's just wounded and bitter. All he needs is love and he'll be fixed right up.' Well, guess what?" he said, unmoved by her horrified expression. "I'm not nice. And I don't need love and I don't want to be fixed. Especially not by you."

"I never," spluttered Ginny, lost for words. "I certainly don't--"

"Good," said Draco. "Put it out of your mind. Because if you want a nice boyfriend, you'd be better off with the one you've got now. Imaginary Harry Potter."

Ginny was so furious, she wanted to hit him. But he has a broken leg, she told herself. You can't hit someone with a broken leg. She wanted to say something nasty and cutting, something really vicious. She wanted to tell him *no wonder your father didn't want you, or Imaginary Harry Potter's better than actual Draco Malfoy any day, just ask Hermione.*

But she couldn't.

Instead, she just said, as evenly as she could, "Malfoy, have you ever even *heard* of tact?"

He opened his eyes and looked at her. She was alarmed to see how dilated his pupils were, whether from shock or pain she wasn't sure. His irises looked black, ringed with only the thinnest band of silver. "Tact is just lying for grown-ups," he said in a level tone.

"Is that one of your father's famous sayings?"

"No," he said. "I made that one up myself."

"Bagpipes," said Sirius firmly.

Narcissa shook her head, not looking up from the bridal magazine she was reading. "No bagpipes," she said, reached for a pillow, and put it behind her head. She was sitting up on the bed in their hotel room, surrounded by magazine clippings, books, and pieces of paper on which she had scrawled possible wedding invitation designs.

"I'm Scottish," said Sirius. "I want to have a Scottish wedding."

Narcissa's mouth twitched into a smile, but she still didn't look up. "I told you that you could wear a skirt if you wanted," she began.

"Kilt," interrupted Sirius, but she ignored him.

"And frankly, I don't care if you wear suspenders and high heels to go with it. And I told you we could serve haggis, and if you want to spend all afternoon tossing the caber in the back yard, that's fine too. But I cannot subject my friends and loved ones to bagpipe music. Think what Draco would say."

"Think what he'll say when you tell him he has to wear that suit you picked out."

"That suit is charming," said Narcissa, but she was definitely smiling

now. She looked up and grinned at him, and he smiled back at her. Like her son's, Narcissa's hair bleached easily in the sun, and now hung in long salt-white ringlets down her back. She looked like she had when they were at school together, he thought. And she did look a great deal like Draco, only the curves of her face were more rounded than his, her chin not as pointy, but the silver-gray eyes that tilted at the edges were the same.

"He'll hate it," said Sirius, positively.

"You don't know that."

"I do know that."

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "You must overcome this delusion that Draco is an exact copy of you when you were his age, Sirius," she said. "I agree you would have hated that suit, but Draco likes clothes, he always has, and -"

"And I'll bet you fifty galleons he sets that suit on fire before he agrees to wear it."

Narcissa suddenly become very interested in her magazine.

"Don't want to bet me, do you?" grinned Sirius. "How about, if I win the bet, I get to have bagpipes?"

"No bagpipes," said Narcissa in a muffled voice.

"There will be bagpipes, or there will be bloodshed," said Sirius.

"Then it'll be a lot like my last wedding," said Narcissa with an evil grin.

When she smiled like that, Sirius thought, she really did look like her son.

"Er," said a voice - neither Narcissa's nor Sirius' - from the corner of the room, and both Sirius and Narcissa jumped. "I'm sorry to intrude, but -"

Sirius leaped to his feet, staring at the fireplace. "Remus?"

"I'm sorry," repeated Lupin, whose head and shoulders were visible in the ornamental fireplace in the corner of the room. He looked extremely unhappy. "I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important." His eyes flicked over to the bed. "Sorry, Narcissa."

She pushed the magazines away and looked anxiously from Lupin to Sirius. "Is everything all right?"

"Harry," said Sirius, dropping down on his knees next to the fireplace. "Has something happened to Harry?"

"He's gone," said Lupin heavily, and felt even guiltier than he already had as the color drained out of Sirius' face.

"Gone?"

"He's gone, his broomstick's gone. My office is destroyed, and the sword I was telling you about - that's gone, too."

"Draco," said Narcissa quickly. "Have you asked him where Harry is?"

"I can't," said Lupin. "He's gone, too."

Narcissa went as white as Sirius had.

"So they're together," said Sirius. "Are you sure they destroyed your office?"

"Positive," said Lupin. "Remember that snow globe you gave me, with the redheaded nymph in it? Well, she saw them come in. They took some implements of mine - an Orb of Thessala, some other things. And they took the sword." He winced. "They smashed the case I put it in. It was adamantine. I've no idea how they did that. I couldn't have done it."

"They're Magids," said Sirius hoarsely.

"They're children," said Narcissa, standing up. "They took the sword - what does that mean? Will it hurt them?"

"I honestly don't know," said Lupin. "I've been searching all day in my books for some mention, some idea what might happen. I can't find anything but vaguely worded prophecies." He rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand, and Sirius saw that his fingers were grained with ink. "But if you're asking me whether it might hurt them, the answer is yes. Yes, they might well be in danger."

"We're coming home," said Sirius. "Right now."

Lupin's shoulders sagged with relief. "Thanks, Padfoot."

"Thanks has nothing to do with it," said Sirius, looking anxiously at Lupin. "This is Harry we're talking about. My responsibility. And Draco. My responsibility too. I should have paid more attention to what you said last time we talked, about them being in worse trouble than we could possibly imagine."

"I really didn't think this would happen," said Lupin, looking defeated. "I've got no idea what I'm going to tell Dumbledore, I don't know if even he knows what the possibilities are--"

Sirius looked like something had just occurred to him. "Remus," he interrupted. "How long has it been since you've been back to the Forbidden Forest?"

"The - the Forest?" said Lupin blankly. "God. Ages."

"If I tell you where to go, could you - could you go there for me and meet someone I think could help us?"

"Go to the Forbidden Forest and meet someone for you?" Lupin repeated, looking bewildered.

"Would I ask you if it wasn't important?"

"Yes," said Lupin, firmly.

"Moony..."

"All right, all right," said Lupin. "What do you want me to do?"

"Stop that," said Harry irritably. "It's extremely annoying."

He glared over at Draco, who made a face back at him. In the two hours since Ron and Ginny had been gone, Draco had discovered that if he held out his hand, palm up, towards Slytherin's sword, it would leap off the ground and into his grasp. This had struck him as such a neat trick that he kept tossing the sword several feet away, making it jump towards him, and then repeating the process. It was giving Harry a headache.

On the other hand, Harry thought, with a twinge of guilt, the pain of having a broken leg must have been awful, and so far Draco hadn't complained.

"Malfoy," he said.

Draco looked up. "What?"

"When the Dementors get near you, what do you hear?"

Draco looked at him narrowly. "A cappella singing," he said finally. "I hate a cappella singing."

"Very funny. What do you really hear?"

Draco was unable to repress a very small shudder. "Horrible things," he said.

"Well, if you quit flinging that sword around, I'll teach you how to get rid of them."

Draco hesitated for a moment, then laid the sword down carefully next to him. He looked over at Harry, who got up from where he was

sitting, came over, and sat down next to Draco, trying to remember exactly how it was that Lupin had explained the Patronus spell to him three years ago.

"Okay," said Harry. "First you've got to think of a happy memory."

Draco blinked. "A what?"

"A happy memory. It's important. The happiest memory you can think of, and you have to really concentrate on it."

Draco shut his eyes and thought. And thought. A happy memory. When had he been happy? Not with his parents, certainly. Not at school. He thought of the wardrobe back at Malfoy Manor, of sitting there with Hermione, eating Chocolate Frogs and kissing. He thought of the night that he had prevented his father from killing Harry, how afterward he had lain in the grass with Harry and Sirius and Hermione sitting around him, and Hermione had told him that he had been amazing and brave. But these memories were colored now by the knowledge that she didn't, in fact, love him, and although he knew that and accepted it, probing the memories too much still set off small agonies inside him, like the pain-warnings of a broken tooth.

He opened his silver eyes and looked at Harry. "I haven't got one," he said.

Harry looked surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," said Draco. "I haven't got a happy memory." He shrugged. "Don't make a big deal about it, Potter."

Harry was stunned. "Surely there must be something."

"Well, there was that time Slytherin won the House Cup my first year. Oh wait, you came along and ruined that one, didn't you? And we've never won a match against you, so that won't work either. What can I say? You've screwed up every happy memory I might ever have had."

Draco had shut his eyes again. The invisible presence of Hermione sat between them, unmentioned. And for the first time in his life, Harry felt a twinge of guilt for having succeeded somewhere that Draco had failed. "Come on, Malfoy," he said hesitantly, "I mean, you must have won something. A contest. Anything."

"Well, there was that time my mum entered me into the Handsomest Boy in Chipping Sodbury contest when I was seven, and I had to wear this outfit she made, and I've suddenly realized that no power on this earth is going to get me to tell you the rest of that story, so never mind. No, Potter, I haven't won any contests." Draco shifted his back against the rough bark of the tree. "Guess you'll have to think of some other spell."

"There is no other spell," said Harry, casting about in his mind for some solution. "Malfoy..." he said slowly. "How's your imagination?"

"My what?"

"Your imagination. Can you imagine a happy memory? Make something up? A fantasy."

"One of those things where I'm sitting on top of a pyramid wearing sun-god robes and being pampered by half-naked temple virgins?"

"If that makes you happy," said Harry, looking dubious. "May I remind you that we're going for happy here, Malfoy, not, er..."

"Right," said Draco, opening his eyes and grinning. "Happy. Okay." He screwed his eyes shut again, and concentrated. Harry watched the moonlight playing over Draco's face, making dark semicircles under his eyes, printing the shadow of leaves against his pale skin, and thought, he's going to be my brother. My brother. He willed it to seem real to him, but it didn't.

"Okay," said Draco, opening his eyes. "Got one."

"Yeah?" said Harry curiously. "What is it?"

"If I told you it involved Hermione, a string-quartet rendition of the

theme music from 'Brigadoon', and a pair of luminous shorts, would you be angry?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"So don't ask," said Draco. He struggled to sit up straighter and without thinking, Harry held out his hand to assist him. Also without thinking, Draco took it, and let Harry help him into a sitting position. "Okay," he said. "I'm ready. Let's try the spell."

They practiced the Patronus spell for over an hour, until Draco could conjure up his 'happy memory' so clearly that it nearly seemed real to him, and Harry had begun stifling yawns with such frequency that Draco eventually began to feel rather guilty.

"Look, Potter," he said. "If you want to sleep for a little while, go ahead and sleep."

"But the spell-"

"You're useless like this, anyway," said Draco. "You keep saying 'Expecto Patroooooooooooooonum.'" He mimicked an enormous yawn.

"I don't need to sleep," said Harry mulishly. "I just want to lie down for a minute."

"So lie down," said Draco, and stifled a smile as Harry lay down, buried his face in his arms, and fell instantly asleep. Draco studied him for a moment, curious, and remembered the thin, gawky little boy he'd first met six years ago in the robe shop in Diagon Alley. He'd looked at Harry, seen his raggedly cut hair and his taped glasses, and thought: charity student. He'd nearly dismissed him outright, but something had made him start up a conversation.

There was something about Harry that made you pay attention to him; Draco couldn't have put a finger on what it was, but knew somehow that it was this, this peculiar and indefinable quality, that he had always envied. Harry had it even when he was exhausted,

even when he was asleep, and Draco thought with a relieved and sudden flicker that he no longer felt particularly envious of Harry in that way. It had passed and now, instead of hating Harry for possessing a quality that made people want to be around him, he wanted to be around him, too. He was happier when Harry was around -- he felt stronger, better, a healthier, more content version of himself; when Harry wasn't there he felt snappish and irritable and as if he'd lost something important. He had no idea what that meant -- perhaps it meant that he and Harry were becoming friends?

What a very strange thought.

He looked over at Harry again. Harry had shifted slightly, so that he lay on his side, and without really thinking about it, Draco reached over and tugged Harry's cloak up and over his shoulders, covering him against the cold night air. Harry shifted but did not wake up and with a sigh Draco drew his hand back, looked down at the sword in his lap, and then up again quickly. A flicker of movement at the corner of his eye had caught his attention. He glanced again at Harry, who lay still and unmoving, and then, with a feeling of distinct unease, turned and looked behind him.

Two red eyes, veined with yellow, stared at him out of the darkness.

Draco jumped violently, and a searing pain shot through his leg.

"Hello," said the demon. Oh, God, Draco thought hopelessly as the demon moved closer. He looked around wildly, saw Harry still asleep, his arm thrown over his face.

That sword is evil and I don't want it near me, Malfoy. You're going to get one of us killed.

Draco looked back at the demon, which was staring at him out of whirling red eyes. I'll just...sit very still, he thought. Maybe it'll just think I can't be bothered to get up.

He cleared his throat, hoping his voice wouldn't sound squeaky. "You again," he said. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"I have come for my other half," replied the demon, looking at the sword in Draco's lap with something that looked unpleasantly like frustrated appetite.

"Now, I just had this feeling you were going to say that," said Draco.

"For a thousand years I have sought it, over sea, under earth -"

"Yes, yes," said Draco, the pain in his leg making him impatient.

"I've heard it all before. I've sought it for a thousand years, it's my other half, I'm a scary demon, gimme the sword, gimp boy."

The demon's eyes gleamed. "You grasp the essence of my mission."

"Now correct me if I'm wrong," said Draco. He held his left hand out in front of him, palm up, and Slytherin's sword leaped into his grasp and rested there with ease and precision. The demon's eyes widened. "But I can kill anything with this sword, right? Human...monster..." He jabbed the sword toward the demon, who skittered back. "Demon..."

"Are you threatening me?" said the demon in a hissing voice.

"So it can hurt you," said Draco, sounding pleased.

"You can't be certain," the demon said, looking shifty.

"No, it's just a wild stab in the dark. Which is what you'll be getting in about one minute if you don't start being a bit more helpful."

The demon bared its teeth, but backed away. "A thousand years ago," it said fiercely, "I traded my powers, in the form of that sword, to a wizard who had made a bargain with my people. He used it to become the most powerful sorcerer of his or any other time. That was all part of the bargain. But it was written in the contract he had made that at the end of a certain term, he was to give the sword back." The demon shook his head. "He never did, and vanished from the sight of the world. Vanished, still owing me! Still owing me my other half!"

"I don't suppose," said Draco, "that anyone involved in this transaction had the forethought to get a receipt?"

The demon looked at him blankly. Draco sighed. "Didn't think so."

"That sword will do you no favors," snarled the demon, fixing its parti-colored eyes on Draco's. "You cannot hope to master it, control it, make it serve you. Instead, you will serve it. Surely you have seen in your dreams what awaits those who use this sword unwisely?"

Draco could feel the sword hilt cold under his hand. "No," he lied. "No dreams."

The demon stood up. Draco tightened his grip on the sword, not knowing what he would do if the demon lunged at him - he couldn't imagine fighting it off while sitting down.

"You have no right to the sword," the demon growled. "What right do you claim?"

Draco thought for a moment. Then he said, very calmly, "I claim the right of inheritance. This sword belonged to my father, and my father's father, and his father before him. Your contract was not with my family, nor with me. Therefore I owe you nothing."

For a moment, the demon did not reply. Draco was disappointed. He had thought it was rather a good speech. Very Malfoy.

"You are determined to retain the sword," said the demon, at last. "Your mind is made up?" "Yes," said Draco. "It is." The demon shrugged. "All right," it said, sounding almost cheerful. "Keep it. May it bring you joy." And it vanished.

Draco stared aghast at the spot where it had been standing, feeling suddenly and vastly uneasy. He thought, rather randomly, of something his father had said - one of Lucius Malfoy's many useful pieces of advice. If a difficult task suddenly seems far too easy, someone is screwing with you. Be suspicious.

"Damn," he said, softly. "I've been had."

His eyes darted around the clearing, searching for any sign of the demon - would it come back? Would it come back, and bring others with it?

The clearing seemed quite empty, dark and silent, and then, out of the corner of his left eye, he saw a movement in between two trees. He felt his hands starting to shake - this was too much, it was too much.

With a feeling of total unreality, he saw two dark-robed, dark-hooded figures step into the clearing, moving forward, utterly soundless. He tried to say Harry's name, but no sound came out of his throat. He let the sword slide out of his hand and pressed his back hard against the trunk of the tree.

The one thought in his mind was that somehow he had to get to his feet. Seizing the hilt of the sword, he turned it upside down, and plunged the tip into the earth. Then slowly, agonizingly, he used it to pull himself upright, trying to put as little weight as possible on his broken leg. He thought he heard the bones grind against each other, and felt his hand so slick with sweat that he nearly lost his grip on the hilt. But he was on his feet now. Leaning hard on the sword, his back against the tree trunk keeping him upright, but on his feet.

He looked up and through a dizzying swirl of colored spots dancing in front of his eyes, he saw the two dark figures moving closer. Closer to him, and to Harry, who was still asleep.

He sucked in air through his teeth, and tried to draw his mind back, away from the clearing, the pain in his leg, his shaking hands, and concentrated hard on feeling happy. Happy, he told himself savagely, happy. He shut his eyes, and felt his hand where it rested on the hilt of the sword. It was cold under his palm, cold and full of power. His heartbeat slowed as his grip on the hilt tightened, and when he raised his left hand it had stopped shaking.

Concentrating as hard as he could on his happy memory, eyes shut tightly, he shouted at the top of his voice: "*Expecto Patronum!*"

Something huge, something vast and silvery-white, shot from his fingers like a bolt of summer lightning. The force of it knocked Draco backwards, and for a moment all he saw as he hit the ground was a sheet of white light shattered by black spots of agony. My leg - it hurts, God, it hurts. "Harry," he tried to say, but his voice disappeared as the whole world seemed to tilt and fade for a moment, everything spinning away into darkness behind his eyes.

I won't faint. I won't.

He forced his eyes open. And saw three very pale faces staring down at him. Harry, Ron and Ginny, all of them looking white with shock and surprise. He struggled to raise himself up on his elbows.

"The Dementors--"

"Malfoy," said Harry, reaching out and putting a hand on his chest, pushing him back down to the ground. "There weren't any Dementors."

"But I saw--"

"That was Ron and Ginny you saw," said Harry, and there was amusement in his voice. "Sorry."

Draco let his eyes flick from Ron to Ginny. They both nodded.

"Damn," he said, with feeling.

"Still, the spell thing was pretty cool," said Ginny. "And you looked very scary and all, at least before you shrieked and fell over and fainted."

"I think you're mixing up 'shriek' with 'howl of murderous rage'," Draco said, and squinted at her. "Are you two all right?"

"The Patronus spell is supposed to protect you against threats," said Harry. "Ron and Ginny aren't a threat, so your Patronus just sort of...vanished."

"And I didn't even get to see it," said Draco mournfully. "Was it cool?"

"It was." Harry's tired, dirt-streaked face broke into a smile. "You did it, Malfoy," he said. "Whatever your happy memory was, it worked."

Draco was too tired to smile back at him, but he said, "You know, Potter, it really doesn't involve Hermione, a pair of luminous shorts, and --"

"I know," Harry cut him off. Ron and Ginny were now looking extremely curious. "I know when you're trying to wind me up, Malfoy. Okay," he added quickly, looking as if he were remembering the destruction of Lupin's office. "Most of the time."

Ginny was gazing at Draco anxiously. "You're shaking," she said.

"The shaking is a side effect of the terror," said Draco. "Don't worry about it."

Harry looked over at Ron. "Did you find anything?" he asked quietly.

Ron shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Nobody around for miles. No towns, no houses. We came back because it was getting dark." He and Harry exchanged an anxious glance. "I was thinking," Ron went on in a low voice, "maybe we could make some kind of stretcher or something. Hang it between the broomsticks. We can't stay here, and we've got to do something."

"It makes me nervous when you carry on about me like I'm not here," said Draco waspishly.

"An easily solved problem," said Ron. He grabbed Harry by the back of his shirt and dragged him a few feet away, where they commenced talking in hushed whispers.

Draco raised himself up on his elbows and looked at Ginny. She

looked back at him with an indifferent expression. "Weasley --" he began, but she cut him off.

"It was a dragon," she said.

"It was what?" said Draco, startled.

"Your Patronus," she said, dispassionately. "It was a dragon. It was silver. I thought you should know."

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by a hoarse shout from Ron, and another shout of surprise from Harry. Ignoring the searing bolt of pain that shot through his leg, he twisted around to see what was going on. He saw Ron and Harry standing with their wands out, and beyond them the dark shape of a tall man. A stranger had Apparated into the clearing.

Lupin turned uneasily in the center of the moonlit grove, his ears pricked, alert for noises. He had not been in the Forbidden Forest for many years, but it had changed surprisingly little, and he had had no trouble following Sirius' directions. Of course, he and Sirius had crisscrossed these paths, four-footed, enough times as children that it was not surprising they were burned into his brain.

The Forest, being a wild place, spoke not just to his human senses but also to his wolf-sense. Through the narrow corridors of trees, he glimpsed the movements of tiny animals - the skitter of their feet, the pale green jewel-like flash of eyes. He breathed in cold night air and the attendant forest smells of mold and moss and animals, of things growing and things dying. He knew this forest was home not just to deer and dormice, but to giant spiders, vampires, hippogriffs, centaurs and unicorns, all manner of things magical, none of which he would have had cause to fear in his lycanthropic form.

As a man, though - but of course, he was never quite a man, never quite only a human man. So it was not entirely surprising that he heard the centaur approaching long before it became visible, breaking from the cover of the trees and cantering towards him. It

was a male centaur, young-looking (although that meant nothing), with pale blond hair and a palomino coat. A satchel was slung over his back and his eyes as he approached Lupin were flinty and suspicious.

"You summoned me," he said. "But you are not Sirius Black."

"Sirius Black sent me," said Lupin quickly. "He said you owed him a favor. I am his friend. He sent me to collect the favor in his name."

The centaur's nostrils flared. "Your kind and my kind are old enemies, werewolf," he said. "You should count it as a favor that I do not trample you to death. If there were more of us here --"

"Yes," said Lupin, "Where are the rest of you? Sirius told me to ask for Ronin, and Bane --"

"Gone," said the centaur, with a hoarse laugh. "Fled in terror, all of them."

"In terror of what?"

"In terror of He who Rises," said the centaur simply. He looked narrowly at Lupin's blank expression. "Surely you know who he is. Surely you know that he made your kind, as assuredly as he made the vampires and the veela, a thousand years ago."

Lupin felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. "Salazar Slytherin," he breathed. "So he *has* come back."

"He is weak now," said the centaur. "He has only just risen. He does not yet possess his old powers. But that will come. We have seen it in the movements of the planets, have read it in the ancient books."

"What ancient books?"

The centaur ignored him. "Now, he retains only enough power to summon his children to him. Already they have begun to travel."

"The Dementors," Lupin said. "So that's where they've gone."

The centaur cocked an eyebrow. "Soon, perhaps, you will feel the summons yourself, werewolf. What of the others of your kind?"

"I am not often with others of my kind," said Lupin. "But I have felt no summons."

"Not yet," said the centaur.

"But if he is weak - if he lacks his old powers -"

"He lacks a Source," said the centaur. "He can do nothing without a Source. But he will find a new one. It is foretold. And when he does-"

"A Source?" Lupin interrupted, bewildered.

The centaur sighed. "I do not have the time to instruct ignorant werewolves," he snapped. "I have the whole Forest to keep in order, and I am alone." He reached around and into the satchel slung over his shoulder, withdrawing a ragged and dilapidated-looking book. He tossed it to Lupin, who caught it reflexively, and stared. "Read that," said the centaur. "Then you will know as much as I do."

"This book," said Lupin, staring down at it, "this will help us?"

The centaur laughed without mirth. "Nothing will help you," he said, turned and broke into a canter. Lupin watched him go, then looked down at the book. He knew he should leave the forest as quickly as possible, but he couldn't help it - he yanked the book open with frantic fingers, and stared down at the pages.

They were covered with incomprehensible squiggles. If it was a language, it wasn't one he had ever seen before.

"Bugger," said Lupin, with feeling.

"*Ron?*" said the stranger, sounding flabbergasted. "What the bloody hell are you doing here?"

Ron dropped his wand. "*Charlie?*"

There was a long, shocked silence. Eventually, Harry had the presence of mind to raise his wand. "*Lumos*," he said in a shaken sort of voice.

White light blazed from the wand tip, illuminating the startled-looking figure of Charlie Weasley. To Harry, he looked much as he'd always looked -- dressed in a heavy leather jacket and looking just a bit burnt, as if he'd narrowly escaped being toasted by dragon fire, although the expression of stupefaction on his face as he stared at his younger brother was new.

"Ron?" he said again.

Ron made a gurgling sort of noise, paused, and tried again. "I -- what are you doing here, Charlie?"

"I was -- I came here because -- there was a dragon here, wasn't there?" said Charlie, casting about wildly. "I heard there was a dragon on the loose here - so I Apparated - I saw it for a second but it vanished -- Ron, what the hell are you playing at, hanging about in the woods, miles from home, chasing dragons? Are you deranged?"

Ron looked furious. Harry stepped in quickly, "There wasn't any dragon, Charlie," he said. "Well, there was, but it wasn't a real dragon. It was a Patronus."

"A what?" said Charlie, staring. "Scratch that," he added hastily. "I know what a Patronus is, but why would you need to conjure one?" He looked at Harry. "Harry, did you--"

"No," said Harry firmly. "It wasn't my Patronus." He pointed the beam of wandlight towards the tree where Draco was lying, Ginny beside him. "It was his."

Charlie's jaw dropped, although he wasn't looking at Draco. "*Ginny?*"

"Hallo, Charlie," said Ginny in a small voice.

Charlie pelted over to the tree, dropped down by his younger sister, and took her by the shoulders. "Ginny! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Charlie, I'm fine, that's just a scratch, really, I-"

"Ow," said Draco, in a small, pained voice. "Ow. Please don't sit on the broken leg."

Charlie jumped back, then stared at Draco as if seeing him for the first time. "Who're you?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Draco.

Charlie looked shocked. "Lucius Malfoy's son?"

Draco looked rebellious. "Yes."

"And that was your Patronus?"

"Yes," said Draco again.

Charlie's face broke into a grin. "That was a hell of a dragon."

"I didn't see it," said Draco, still looking rebellious, although slightly less so.

Ginny interrupted. "His leg's broken, Charlie," she said.

Charlie stopped grinning. "How did that happen?"

"It's kind of a long story," said Ron, looking nervous.

"Fell off my broomstick," said Draco shortly.

"Apparently not that long," said Charlie, and dropped down on his knees next to Draco. "Which leg?"

Draco pointed. While Ron, Harry and Ginny watched -- Ron with surprise, Harry and Ginny with concern -- Charlie took out his wand and touched the tip of it gently to Draco's leg, just below the knee. "Compound fracture," he said briefly. "Looks like you put a right lot of work into messing up this leg, young Malfoy. Broken *and* twisted. You'd better come back to the camp with me - it's not far from here. All of you," he added, looking pointedly at Ron.

"How?" said Harry. "Malfoy can't fly with his leg like that."

Charlie reached into his breast pocket and removed a small silver box, about the size of a cigarette case, which he flipped open to reveal a hollowed-out square in which rested a small metal orb, about the size of a marble. "Portkey," he said. "We all carry them."

"And when we get to your camp, you can fix Malfoy's leg?" said Ginny anxiously.

"When you work with dragons, you get used to dealing with horrible injuries," said Charlie cheerfully. "One of our medic wizards can fix him right up. And in the meantime," he said, giving Ron a hard look, "you can tell me just exactly what you've been up to out here."

Hermione, who had been sitting with her back to the stone wall of the tower, looked up as the door opened. To her surprise, it was Wormtail, not Slytherin. He closed the door behind him and turned to face her, and she saw that in his hand he was carrying a carved silver goblet, which was smoking and steaming.

A cold fist of fear clenched inside her stomach.

"Hello, Hermione," he said calmly.

"What do you want?" she said coldly.

"I just don't understand," he said in an unpleasant voice, "how a clever girl like you never learned any manners."

"You know what I don't understand?" said Hermione. "How Sirius and Harry's father ever could have been friends with you in the first place. You're disgusting."

She thought, but could not be sure, that she saw him flinch. A moment later, though, his smile widened, and he took several more steps towards her. She saw, with a sinking sensation, that in the hand that wasn't holding the goblet, Wormtail was gripping his wand. "My Master has given me permission to hurt you," he said. "Just give me the chance, and I will."

Hermione was silent.

"Quiet now, are you?" he said nastily. "Throat dry? Here." He held out the goblet to her. "Have a drink."

She stared down into the intricately carved cup, which held a bluish-red liquid that swirled and steamed and popped with bubbles. It had a strong smell - not a bad smell, actually, rather a pleasant one, like lemons and roses and freshly baked bread.

"I'm not thirsty," she said tightly.

Wormtail grinned. "It's up to you," he shrugged. "You can either drink it, or I can put the Cruciatus Curse on you and torture you until you no longer have the use of your limbs. Then I'll force you to drink it anyway. But if you want to be stupid and brave, I'm all for it. Because I really want to torture you."

Hermione could feel her heart beating in ugly, pressurized thumps against her ribcage. She remembered how Lucius had used the Cruciatus Curse on her back at Malfoy Manor, trying to get her to tell him where Harry was... remembered wishing she could die. It wasn't something she would ever forget.

Dully, she held out her hand and let Wormtail put the goblet in it. She considered dashing the contents of it onto the floor, but Wormtail was gazing at her with an expression that looked horribly like hunger. He was itching to hurt her. She could tell.

She raised the cup to her mouth, and drank.

It tasted of bitter sugar, sweet and stinging. She coughed, looking up to see Wormtail watching her avariciously as she swallowed.

The world seemed to tilt around her. Somewhere, Wormtail was giggling, but Hermione barely heard him. A dizzy whirring noise had started in her ears; it sounded like there were a thousand trapped butterflies struggling to get out of her head. She could feel the potion burning its way down into her stomach, as if she had swallowed fire or pure light; she almost expected her skin to start glowing like a torch. She was terrified, and at the same time, felt a strange sort of dizzy and sickening pleasure, which was almost worse. "Was that..." she gasped out, "Was that poison?"

Wormtail laughed harshly. "Not at all," he said, leaning forward and deftly plucking the cup from her loosening fingers. "That, my dear, was what is commonly termed a love potion."

Her eyelids were so heavy they felt like stones, but she dragged them open and stared at Wormtail with dimly realized horror. "Love potions...they're not real...they don't work..."

"Oh, but they are, and they do," said Wormtail. "That was one of the oldest. The use of it is quite illegal, of course. Life sentence in Azkaban. But," he shrugged, "that hardly matters."

"I can't," gasped Hermione, as the world tilted around her, "I can't stay awake..."

"That's right," said Wormtail in a singsong voice. "The potion takes a few hours to work. When you awake, the first person before your eyes will be the person you will love from that moment on, desperately and unconditionally and forever. Dark magic," he smiled, showing his little rat teeth. "There's nothing like it. Sleep tight, dear girl," he added, as Hermione sank back into the straw. "And when you awake, the face of Salazar Slytherin will be the first thing that you see."

"So, do mum and dad have the least idea where you are?" said Charlie, fixing Ron with a look so terrifying it almost made Harry glad that he had no older brothers.

When they had arrived at the camp -- and it really was a camp, a collection of tents of various sizes, most of which were occupied by Charlie's dragon-studying colleagues -- the first thing Charlie had done was to call for several medic wizards, who had carted Draco away to the tent that apparently served as an infirmary.

This left Harry, Ron and Ginny to face the music. The music, in the case, was an extremely irritable Charlie Weasley, who wanted nothing more than to immediately owl both his parents and tell them that Ron and Ginny were in fact, not at home, but wandering at large around some rather distant forests with Lucius Malfoy's son and Harry, both of whom were supposed to be at school.

"Charlie, don't," said Ron, sounding rather desperate. "They're on vacation in the Lake District...I didn't want to bother them."

Charlie shook his head. "You're up to something, Ron," he said. "Remember, I'm related to Fred and George as well as you. I know that up-to-something expression."

"Like you've never been up to anything," said Ron heatedly. "All those times when I was a kid and you swore me to secrecy, I never grassed on you, not once."

"You're still a kid, Ron," said Charlie. "Your safety is my main concern. Your safety, and Ginny's."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here!" snapped Ginny. "And you're being totally unfair to Ron!"

Charlie looked taken aback.

"He's not Fred or George," she stormed. "When Ron does things, it's because he's got a good reason. He doesn't take stupid risks. And neither does Harry!"

"Mum and Dad wouldn't be happy if --"

Ginny cut Charlie's protest off with a wave of her hand. "I remember when you decided you wanted to work with dragons, and Mum cried for a week," she said sharply. "She was sure you'd be killed. They don't like your job or Bill's hair or Percy being a workaholic either, but they trust us, all of us, and especially Ron. Why don't you?"

Charlie opened his mouth, with the stunned expression of someone who just knows there's a loophole in the logic he's just heard, but can't quite put a finger on what it is.

"Ginny..."

"Just trust us, Charlie," she said.

Wearily, Charlie raised a hand and rubbed at his bleary eyes. Then he sighed. "Anyone want to come and see the dragons?" he offered, rather abruptly.

"I do," said Harry and Ginny immediately - Ginny, because she truly liked dragons and Harry because he had a feeling that this was the way to get on Charlie's good side. Ron, still looking thunderous, agreed more reluctantly.

They followed Charlie through the camp, casting each other uneasy glances as they went. Despite Charlie's sudden offer, they had a feeling he was still in a fairly apprehensive mood.

Several meters past the last tent was a large cleared area, about the size of two Quidditch fields, ringed around with magical barriers. Inside the cleared area were several dragons, none of them as large as the Hungarian Horntail Harry had faced his third year. Harry thought he recognized one of them as a Swedish Short-Snout. Charlie pointed at it. "That's the dragon that told me about Draco's Patronus," he said.

"Dragons talk?" said Ron, looking startled.

"Well, you have to learn Dragonish to communicate with them, and even then it's unrewarding," said Charlie. "Mostly it's a lot of reminiscing about the good old days when villagers used to leave girls tied to stakes for them to eat, and complaining about why don't they get to fly more, and wanting to be told how pretty their scales are. But," he added, "every once in a while they've got a useful piece of information. Like tonight."

"We told you," said Ron. "It wasn't a real dragon. It was a Patronus."

"Helped me find you, didn't it?"

Ron looked as if he wasn't sure whether or not this was a good thing.

"Would you look at that," said a voice behind them. It was Draco, having emerged at last from the infirmary tent. His clothes were as battered and dirty as they had been before, but the cuts and scratches on his arms and face were mostly gone, and his leg, obviously, was back to normal -- although the medic wizards had cut away his left trouser leg below the knee, presumably to get at the broken bone. Draco didn't seem to mind, though. He had a rapt expression on his face as he gazed past them at the dragons.

"They're fantastic," he said.

Charlie suddenly beamed. "Aren't they?"

"Don't know why we've never done dragons in Care of Magical Creatures," said Draco, still staring upward.

"Probably the same reason we've never done Certain Death Charms in Flitwick's class," said Ron sourly. "Mortality rate."

"Malfoy," said Harry, sounding curious, "that dragon is staring at you."

He was right. The blue Swedish Short-Snout had fixed its enormous dinner-plate eyes on Draco and was gazing at him with a look that could almost be described as fond. Charlie looked amazed. "I think she likes you," he said to Draco. "That hardly ever happens."

"Maybe he smells like food," muttered Ron.

Draco approached the barrier, stood as close to it as he could, and gazed up at the dragon, which gazed back, emitting cheerful-looking puffs of smoke.

"Well, I'll be," said Charlie, still looking startled. He turned to Draco. "Do you - do you want to help me feed them later?" he asked. "I wouldn't ask, but it's so rare that they take to people...I just thought..."

Draco nodded. "Sure."

Charlie looked thrilled. As Ron looked on resentfully, he clapped Draco on the back in a brotherly manner and said, "That's great, that's just - great." Then, seeming to notice Draco's rather battered appearance for the first time, he said hastily, "It looks like you might need to borrow some clothes."

"Trousers," said Draco immediately. "I don't much fancy pioneering the new one-trouser-leg look, even if we are in the middle of nowhere."

"You can have some of my old clothes," said Charlie amicably. "Come along with me, all of you, you can wash up in the tents."

"In one second," said Draco. "I want to talk to Harry."

"We'll meet you over there," said Harry to Ron, who shrugged and walked off with Charlie and Ginny.

Harry looked at Draco curiously. "What is it, Malfoy?"

"We're really close," said Draco in a low, excited voice. "The Charm - as soon as we got here, it started, I don't know, *vibrating*. We can't be more than an hour away from wherever Hermione is."

Harry looked at Draco hard. "You're sure."

Draco grinned. "Have I ever let you down?"

"Do you *actually* want me to answer that?"

"Whatever, Potter," said Draco. "I'm still right. I think we should go immediately -- well as soon as I get some new clothes, but relatively immediately. And I think we should take as few Weasleys with us as possible."

Harry looked astonished. "Go without Ron and Ginny?"

Draco nodded.

"That's ridiculous, Malfoy. Whatever happened to strength in numbers?"

"Two's a number," observed Draco.

"I'm not going anywhere without Ron," said Harry.

"Why not? You'll just have to worry about protecting him--"

"You don't know the first thing about him!" yelled Harry.

"And you think you do?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Draco gave him a narrow look. "Nothing, if you don't want to hear it," he said.

"I don't listen to him when he talks about you," said Harry. "Why should I listen to you when you talk about him?"

Draco looked startled. Possibly it hadn't occurred to him that Harry might ever stick up for him.

"I'm tired of you two sniping," said Harry. "I am tired of this stupid family feud of yours. Keep it up if you want, but I plan to ignore you."

"Sure," said Draco. "When nothing else works, a total pig-headed unwillingness to look facts in the face will always see us through."

"You're not going to be able to make me angry," said Harry, starting to walk away. "Not this time."

Draco followed him, still argumentative. "That's right, Potter, scuttle away..."

"I am not scuttling away. I am stalking away. So sod off, Malfoy, and go bother Charlie. At least *he* likes you."

Charlie's tent was set back from the others and, like many wizarding tents, was much more spacious inside than it appeared from outside. Inside, it was a tidy little bachelor apartment. The door opened onto a small kitchen, in which Draco waited while Charlie went off to get him a change of clothing. Draco could glimpse other rooms leading off a narrow corridor, each decorated with neat wooden furniture pieces that looked as if Charlie had made them by hand. Over the fireplace in the kitchen hung a photograph of the Weasley family, waving and smiling, and next to it was a square silver mirror.

Draco glanced into it, wincing as he saw just how bloodied, muddied, and battered he looked.

"Ve-ry interesting," drawled the mirror in a decidedly feminine voice, making him jump. "Lots of promise here. Can't wait to see how you clean up."

Charlie, who had come back into the room carrying a pile of clothing, snorted with laughter. "Leave him alone, Audrey," he said sternly to the mirror. "He's only sixteen."

"Seventeen in a month," said Draco automatically, backing away from the mirror. He was used to mirrors that talked, but not necessarily mirrors that talked so frankly.

"Here," said Charlie, setting the clothes he had brought down on the table. "Some of my clothes, I don't know if they'll fit you, but...I brought you one of my old jackets, too, in case you wanted to come with me to feed the dragons. They really seem to like you. Ever thought of studying dragons, maybe, after you graduate? You could get an internship."

"Never thought about it," said Draco truthfully, shrugging off his jacket and reaching for the clothes on the table. Charlie whistled. "That," he said, "is a great sword."

Draco glanced down at Slytherin's sword, which was stuck through his belt. "Thanks," he said. "It's been in my family for a long time."

"Can I see it?" Charlie asked, reaching out a hand.

Draco shook his head. "It's enchanted," he said regretfully. "It'd char off your fingers."

"Well, who wouldn't enchant a sword like that?" said Charlie, with another dazzled look. "Although," he added, "you're carrying it wrong." He grinned at Draco's expression. "There's no point sticking it through your belt where it's going to bang against your leg every time you move. You should carry it over your shoulder, so you can reach back and grab it if you need it, but it'll be out of your way."

"You seem to know a lot about this," said Draco.

"I like swords," said Charlie. "It sort of goes with the liking-dragons thing. I've got lots of gear I could lend it to you."

"Thanks," Draco said.

"As a matter of fact," said Charlie thoughtfully, "if you're going to be feeding dragons, you're going to need all the right gear. Hold on a minute, I'll be right back."

"Your brother seems to like Malfoy," said Harry, as he and Ron washed the dirt off their faces and hands in the tent that Charlie had provided for them. "The dragons like Malfoy, so Charlie likes him," said Ron, shrugging. "He'd like the Dark Lord if he got along with the Hungarian Horntails. At least it took his mind off us."

Harry looked at himself in the mirror over the sink. He'd removed most of the dirt and blood with a washcloth, revealing a very pale, very unhappy face whose green eyes were smudged with exhaustion. He put his glasses back on and straightened up, running a hand through his untidy hair. "Cheer up, love," said the mirror gently. "Nothing's that bad."

Outside the tent they met Ginny, who, not being as filthy as the boys, had cleaned herself up more quickly. Her red hair, wet from being washed, hung in damp fiery tendrils around her face. She smiled at Ron, then looked anxiously at Harry, "Feeling better?"

Harry shrugged. "Just tired."

Ron smiled at his sister, and then his eyes slid sideways and he stared in surprise. "Well, would you look at Malfoy," he said.

Ginny and Harry turned and glanced where Ron had indicated. Draco was walking towards them across the clearing. Charlie had dressed him in an outfit that was much like his own. It appeared to be standard dragon-keeper wear, if anything about dragon keeping could be considered standard. Draco wore Charlie's jacket of black dragon-hide leather, and black dragonhide trousers. Charlie had also given Draco a pair of sturdy black boots, which were a little too big on him, and a worn dark pullover sporting undarned holes in the sleeves. Against all the black, Draco's silvery hair and pale skin stood out startlingly. He looked a older, thought Ginny, and different, and just a little...dangerous.

"Heavens above," said Ginny, utterly unaware that she was speaking out loud. "Malfoy looks really hot." She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Did you just hear me say that?"

Ron nodded.

"Oh, God," said Ginny, with feeling. "Somebody, kill me please. I don't want to live anymore."

Harry snorted with laughter.

"Ginny, shut up," said Ron, looking exasperated. "He looks like an idiot."

"No he doesn't," said Ginny, sounding amazed, "he looks...like a painting I saw once..."

Harry snorted again, this time in disgust. "I can just see that hanging in the Tate," he said. "'Still Life with Prat in Ridiculous Trousers.'"

Ginny ignored him, standing with her hand over her mouth as Draco approached them, waving. When he reached them, he looked at her curiously. "Something wrong?" he said.

Ginny squeaked, turned around, and fled in the opposite direction.

Draco looked curiously at Ron. "What's bothering her?"

"Leather," said Harry, looking after Ginny with an expression of mixed amusement and surprise. "She hates leather. She's a vegetarian."

Draco rolled his eyes. "It's dragon-hide," he said. "Taken from already-dead dragons, might I add. Dragons are way to valuable to kill for their skins."

Ron made a muffled sort of noise.

"Do you want me to go and tell her?" said Draco, sounding exasperated.

"Oh, no," said Ron. "She wants to be alone, with her, uh..."

"Vegetarianism," said Harry.

Draco looked at them dispassionately. "You two are the least skilled liars in the world," he said. "And I include Neville Longbottom in that statement."

"Then you'll know that I'm not lying when I tell that you look completely ridiculous," said Ron. "Leather trousers, Malfoy?"

"They are flame-retardant dragon hide and extremely useful," said Draco, aiming his nose into the air. "Besides, I look really hot in them."

"Nausea..." said Ron, weakly. "Building...inside me. Must...be sick in bucket."

"*You* have no taste," said Draco, to him, coldly, and turned to Harry. "You think I look hot, don't you?"

"There is absolutely no way for me to answer that that would not get at least one person angry at me," said Harry diplomatically.

Draco smiled smugly. "You fear your love for me," he said. "I understand."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I think I might need that bucket when you're done with it, Ron."

"Break it up, you lot," said Charlie who had come up behind them, grinning. "Draco's going to help me feed the dragons."

"No, Draco isn't," said Ron firmly. "We have to go. Now. If you want to prat around feeding dragons, Malfoy, that's fine. Just give us the Charm and we'll go without you."

Charlie looked from Draco to Ron to Harry. He opened his mouth to say something, but whatever it was he saw in Harry's expression made him shut his mouth. "All right," he said. "All right. I don't know what you boys have gotten yourself mixed up in. Ron, I'm going to put a Tracking Charm on you. If you're not back in three hours, I'm going to Apparate myself to wherever you are. Is that clear?"

Ron nodded. "Clear," he said.

"And Ginny stays here," added Charlie.

"She won't like that," said Harry.

"I don't care," said Charlie, with a faint grin. "I'd be in enough trouble if Mum knew I was letting Ron go off to do God-knows-what with you two. Add in Ginny, and I might as well never come home again."

I won't fall asleep. I won't.

Hermione lay on the straw in the tower room where Wormtail had left her, her hands clamped firmly over her eyes. The moment he had left the room, she had begun whispering under her breath, chanting a Wakefulness Charm she had often used while studying late into the night. Slowly, very slowly, the fog had begun to recede from her brain, the bright dancing colors behind her eyelids had vanished, and she no longer felt that she was in danger of slipping into unconsciousness. She would have liked to think that since she had conquered the sleeping spell that the love potion would no longer work either, but she had little hope that this would turn out to be true.

To keep herself from panicking, she tried to think of pleasant things, things that had once made her happy. She shut her eyes tightly, thought of her parents, of school, of Hogsmeade trips with Ron and Harry. And then, just of Harry. The happiest she'd ever been in her life had been those last two weeks with Harry at school. More than anything in the world, she wanted to hear Harry's voice again. She pictured him in her mind, the last week of school, felt her mind pressing down on the memory as if the pressure of wanting could make it real.

Harry was smiling at her, holding her hand, tugging her down the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room. *Harry, I have*

homework, she was protesting, laughing. Harry, you can't be using the Marauder's Map just to find unattended closets we can make out in.

Harry laughed, Why not? He consulted the Map. What about this closet? This is a great closet.

Harry, all closets are pretty much the same.

Oh, no. This one's exceptional. He picked her up and carried her into the closet, setting her down carefully and kicking the door shut behind him. Okay. Here we are. Nice closet, isn't it?

Harry...are we in here for a reason?

We've had exams all week and I feel like all I've been doing is studying and packing and other stuff I don't want to do. I've hardly seen you. I guess I just wanted to be alone with you. I don't care if we do anything else. Really. I just want to look at you.

Well, I don't stand around in broom closets just for fun.

Meaning?

Meaning you better kiss me, Harry Potter, or I'll put the Leg-Locker Hex on you and leave you here until Filch finds you.

Harry threw the Map up into the air in delight. Finally, something I want to do!

Her fingers, pressed tightly over her eyes, couldn't stop the tears from coming. Harry seemed a million miles away; everything seemed a million miles away, as if it had happened a thousand years ago, not just two weeks.

Draco had been right; they were very close by. They had been flying barely forty-five minutes (Draco back on his Firebolt, which one of Charlie's wizard friends had mended with several charms and some

Spellotape) when Draco gestured to Ron and Harry that they should descend.

They found themselves standing in what had probably once been an enormous clearing, although it was now overgrown with trees. The half-ruined walls Draco had seen when he held the Charm loomed darkly over them; inside the walls, half-veiled in shadows, he had recognized the tower and the overgrown gardens that surrounded it as they had descended through the air.

It was dank, gloomy and mournful under the trees. Harry, Draco and Ron looked at each other uneasily. "I guess we should climb over the walls," said Harry, finally.

"We could fly over," suggested Ron.

"Too visible," said Draco. "Might as well just march up to the front door."

"What if we --" Ron began.

He was interrupted by a sudden sound that emanated from the opposite side of the wall -- a sound like music. Harry, with a jolt at his heart, first thought it must be phoenix song. It had the same ethereal sweetness, but as he listened, he realized it was higher and sweeter and more piercing still, and it seemed somehow to draw him forward...forward towards the wall...

"Hey!" said Draco, staring at Harry and Ron, both of whom had flung themselves at the wall and seemed to be attempting to climb it. Reaching out, he seized the two of them by the backs of their robes and yanked them bodily back down. "Snap out of it!" he shouted, dragging them away from the wall. Thankfully, the singing had begun to fade. 'Both of you!'

Ron wrenched his robe of out Draco's hands and snarled, "Snap out of what?"

"You were going to climb over the wall," said Draco.

"No we weren't," protested Ron.

"Yes we were," said Harry, whose robe was still gripped in Draco's hand. "What was that, Malfoy?"

"The singing noise? That was veela song," said Draco. "Pretty, wasn't it?"

"Veela?" repeated Ron, looking astounded.

"Looks like the place is guarded by veela," said Draco. "Bit of a clever idea, that."

Ron snorted. "What're they going to do, kiss us to death?"

Draco gave him a disgusted look.

"What?" snarled Ron, nettled.

"You don't know anything about veela, do you Weasley?" Draco said. "True veela have only two uses for human men. Procreation ... and food."

"Food?" echoed Ron, looking faint.

"Food," repeated Draco. He grinned. "I read my great-great grandmother's diary once," he said. "There was this passage in there about how this human man invited her over for dinner, only of course he didn't realize that she thought he was going to *be* dinner, and there she was caught short with no carving knives. Fortunately he had an extensive penknife collection, and I can tell you're going to be a tough audience for *this* story, so I'll just shut up right now. Suffice it to say, veela are dangerous. They're Dark magic creatures."

Harry looked horrified. "Lupin," he said.

"Oh, Fleur's only a fourth veela," said Draco, with equanimity. "The most she'll do is nibble on his earlobe."

"I could have done without that image," said Ron.

But Harry was looking at Draco. "What do we do?" he said.

"Well," said Draco, "either you can go wandering in there and be veela snack food in about ten minutes, or you can wait here while I go in and talk to them."

"Won't you get eaten?" said Ron, sounding rather hopeful.

"I'm part veela," said Draco. "They won't bother me."

Harry looked at him. "Are you sure?"

Draco took a deep breath. "I'm sure," he said. "Can you lift me over the wall?"

Harry took his wand out. "Yeah, I can," he said. He took a step back, pointed the wand at Draco. "Wingardium leviosa!" Draco rose up in the air slowly, and landed on the top of the wall on his hands and knees. He looked down at Harry, standing below him with his wand out, his green eyes tense but steady.

"Malfoy," said Harry.

"What?"

"You'll come back, right?"

"I'll come back," said Draco, and jumped down from the wall into the garden.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, a wave of frigid air washed over him, redolent with the scent of dust and rotting flower petals. The light seemed to fade, although the sun was still high overhead. It was as if a dim, shimmering curtain had dropped down before his eyes - he saw dusty rows of flowerbeds, interspersed with indistinct hedges starred with pale and withered flowers. In the distance, he could see the gray hulking wall of the tower.

He could still hear the veela song, although it too was dimmed, as if

his ears had been stuffed with cotton wool. When he started to move forward, even the sound of his boots on the gravel came faintly to his ears. Everything was incredibly still, there seemed to be no movement at all - until he caught a the faintest flicker of white light at the corner of his eye, like the glancing wing of a white butterfly, and turned and saw them.

They evolved out of the shadows between the shrubbery; white on darkness, a half-dozen or so tall, pale, beautiful women with long hair that shimmered like silver in the dim light. For all his talk, Draco had never seen a pureblooded veela up close. He felt as if a chilly fist had squeezed his heart, felt terror and admiration in equal measure. He stood his ground as they came up to him - there seemed little point in running away.

They approached slowly, not hurrying - it was hard to tell how many of them there actually were they seemed to flit back and forth like butterflies. There was a taller one in the center of the group who seemed to walk a little ahead. Draco decided she was the head veela, an assumption that seemed to be borne out when they stopped, a mere foot from him, and the tall veela gestured the others to be silent.

"You have been unwise in coming here, human man," she said to Draco, her red lips parted over her sharp white teeth and she stared at him.

"Look at me," said Draco, trying to keep his voice steady. "Do I look human to you?"

The veela blinked.

One of them said, in a tinselly little voice, "He isn't as ugly as most of them, is he?"

"His hair is just like ours," said another.

"I'm awfully hungry," said yet another, a statement that caused Draco to jump back a foot.

"There is one way to tell for sure," said the head veela, and stepping towards an astonished Draco, she seized him and kissed him firmly on the lips.

It was more like being caught in a hurricane or some kind of freak meteorological occurrence than any kiss he'd experienced or imagined before. He seemed to hear a raging wind tearing through his head, felt himself spinning, was blinded by whirling streaks of silver. In the back of his mind, he heard Ron saying: *what're they going to do, kiss us to death?* Chalk one up for Weasley, he thought, and wondered if he might be going to black out.

The veela released him, and the sickening whirling-howling tempest stopped abruptly.

She smiled. "He *is* one of us," she announced, and the other veela, giving shrieks of delight, fell on him like a consortium of mad aunts -- pulling at his hair, stroking the lapels of his leather jacket, pinching at any exposed skin they could reach, and "Ow! Who bit me?" yelled Draco indignantly, trying unsuccessfully to wriggle away from their grasping hands. There must not be many part-veela men, he thought, slapping a hand that was reaching for his belt buckle. Wish somebody'd *TOLD* me that before. "Hey! Stop that!" His voice, steady for two full years now, chose that moment to rocket up several octaves. "Hands off!" he squeaked warningly. "Ow -okay, that really isn't necessary... Leave my hair alone! Calm down for God's sake, there's plenty of Draco Malfoy to go around, you know -"

He broke off as the veela released him and stepped back, suddenly silent. The head veela stared at him in surprise. "You're Draco Malfoy?" she said.

Draco was floored. Of course, he'd always dreamed that there would come a day when he would be so famous that the mere mention of his name would silence a room full of people. He just hadn't realized it had already happened.

"You should have said so," said the head veela, sounding indignant.

"I - should have - what?" Draco spluttered inelegantly, but the veela,

looking haughty, had already begun stalking away.

Draco stared after them, his mouth open in shock. *I have absolutely no idea what just happened*, he thought to himself. *No idea whatsoever. One day I'll find out what that was all about.*

But not right now.



He began edging away towards the tower walls, half expecting that one of the veela would dash over to try to stop him. But not one of them did. They seemed to have forgotten he was even there.

He continued to edge until he could no longer see them. The he paused, straightened up, and glanced around.

And felt his heart thump in surprise.

He recognized where he was. The gray, tired-looking tower with its burnt, black walls - the dead trees - this was what he had seen in his mind when he had used the Epicyclical charm. He must be very close to where Hermione was. He began to walk more quickly, excited, skirting the wall, turning a corner, and as the familiar-looking half-burned tower came into view he suddenly heard Harry's voice in his head, *Malfoy, you will come back?*

Draco began to walk more slowly. Had Harry meant come back in one piece? Or had he meant come back when you've gotten rid of the veela so that we can go on together? He knew, of course. He knew exactly what Harry had meant. Harry wouldn't want to be left out of any part of this, would resent being abandoned to stand outside the walls while Draco went to look for Hermione. Something he had no real right or business doing.

I should go back, he thought. I should go back and get Ron and Harry. Harry's face swam in front of his eyes suddenly, wan and anxious it he had been the last few days.

Ouch!

He had walked into the wall of the castle. He stepped back, rubbing his elbow where he'd banged it against the stone, and looked up. He was standing directly under a tumbledown wall, the north side of which was blackened as if it had been burned in a fire. He felt a thrill of recognition.

I'm here.

Halfway up the wall, he could see a square barred window. He could feel the Charm around his neck, pulsing hot and cold against his skin. She was here; she was close by. If he closed his eyes, he could see her face. He could see himself rescuing her, see her looking up at

him, telling him he was amazing, brave.

Forget it, he told himself sharply. She chose Harry. She's not going to be pleased about being rescued, either, especially not by me -- she's far too independent, she's not going to throw her arms around me and tell me I've been brave. She'll probably just kick me in the ankle.

You'll come back, right? said Harry's voice in his head.

Who cares what he meant? said another, sharper voice. *Harry always gets to be the hero. Wins every game. Gets the girl. It'll always be that way; it'll never change. He won the last round; this won't make any real difference to him. But this is your chance to show you're better. Better or just as good.*

He raised his hand without thinking, pointed at the barred window.

"Accio!"

There was a ripping, tearing sound, and the bars wrenched themselves free of the stone that held them and flew at him with such force that he jumped aside, letting them thunk loudly into the grass. He looked around wildly, but the gardens were as empty as before.

Now climb, he told himself.

Still, it was another several long moments before he could force his feet to move.

Wormtail smiled to himself with satisfaction as he eased the stone door open and stepped into the round room. It was just as he had left it; the darkness, the straw scattered across the floor, and Hermione, lying unconscious on the bed of straw, her cheek pillowed on her hand. He knelt down next to her, checking to make sure her eyes were closed, then pulled a length of material from his pocket and commenced binding it around her eyes, tying it tightly.

It wouldn't do for her to see anyone before the person she was intended to see. If, he thought, you could accurately call Salazar Slytherin a person.

He had just leaned forward to check that the knot behind her head was secure, then out of the corner of his eye, caught a flicker of movement. He turned his head, and to his utter astonishment, saw Hermione's hand emerging from his pocket -- but she'd been unconscious -- clutching it its grip his wand.

He gasped involuntarily, and saw her shaking hand swing around to point the wand at him.

"*Stupefy!*" she hissed.

For a moment, Hermione thought the spell hadn't worked. Then she heard the thud as Wormtail collapsed to the floor, landing heavily across her left leg. Revolted, she wriggled violently to the side, still gripping the wand, and staggered to her feet. She took a step forward, and her foot connected with something solid and heavy - Wormtail's body.

Feeling nauseated, she staggered backwards, her hands outstretched behind her, until she struck the wall. She began to feel her way along it; her eyes squeezed shut under the blindfold, her fingers skittering over the rough stone. Her ears were pricked for any sound from Wormtail, but the room was utterly silent.

Her fingers found the smoother wood of the door, slid down it, and found the knob. She wrenched at it, but it was immovable. Desperately, she clawed at the lock, but it was impossible, without being able to see it, for her shaking fingers to make sense of the complex metal configurations. At last she reached up, ripped the blindfold down -- *I won't look behind me, I won't* -- saw the lock, twisted it sharply, and wrenched the door open.

And saw Draco, standing astonished on the other side.

References:

1) "No, it's just a wild stab in the dark. Which is what you'll be getting in about one minute if you don't start being a bit more helpful." — Blackadder.

2) "It's kind of a long story," said Ron, looking nervous.

"Fell off my broomstick," said Draco shortly.

"Apparently not that long." -- Buffy; the episode 'Phases.'

3) "A total pig-headed unwillingness to look facts in the face will always see us through." Blackadder.

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Draco Sinister

Chapter Five - The Undiscovered Country

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As astonished as Draco was to see Hermione, he was even more astonished by the look on her face. She looked as horrified as if she had seen a ghost -- and not just any ghost. The ghost of someone she loved.

"Hermione?" he said. "Are you - are you all right?"

She stared at him, still with the same awful, blank expression. "Oh, no," she said. "Not *you*."

He stared at her.

"I suppose you're here to rescue me," she said flatly, looking as if she were going to burst into tears.

"I-well, yes," he replied, floored. "Shall I come back at a more convenient time?"

"Why couldn't you have been Harry?" she said, still staring at him distractedly. "Is he all right? Why isn't he here?"

Draco stared at her. He hadn't expected a really big welcome, but this was ridiculous. "There were these veelas..." he began, awkwardly. "And Harry's fine, he's waiting outside. And my God, Hermione, what'd you do to Pettigrew?" he added, staring over her shoulder.

Hermione turned around, following his glance, and saw Wormtail lying sprawled on his back in the straw. Apparently, when she had kicked him, it had been in the face. The straw around his head was

dark with blood.

"I hit him," she said shortly.

"I should say you did," agreed Draco, rather impressed. Then he shook his head, as if clearing it of cobwebs. "Is he the one who was keeping you here?" he demanded.

Hermione shook her head listlessly. "No."

"So there's someone else here-someone more evil, more powerful?"

Hermione nodded yes.

"Right," said Draco, and seized her arm. "We're going." Hermione didn't seem to want to move, so Draco began dragging her behind him down the hallway. She trailed him unwillingly, glancing behind her every few steps as if she expected them to be followed.

"Do you know the way out?" he asked her, panting a little as he tugged on her arm. "And would you hurry up?"

"No, I don't know the way out," she replied in a leaden voice. "I don't think there is one - and he's around here somewhere, he's not going to let us just leave-"

"Who's he? Voldemort?"

She laughed hollowly. "Voldemort? No."

They reached the top of a wide staircase, carved of pitted stone, that swept down to what looked like it had once been an entrance hall. Draco could see the dim outline of broken pillars and a cracked marble floor. He turned and looked at Hermione, who was still looking blank, stunned, and miserable. "Can you make it down the stairs?"

"I am perfectly fine," she said, in a clipped voice.

"Okay..." He looked at her, bewildered, shook his head, and started



down the steps. She followed him, walking slowly. He had to resist the urge to hurry her forward in exasperation. I don't know what she's been through, he reminded himself. Anything could have happened to her - anything at all. He cast a sideways look at her. She looked all right - tired, of course, and with that mother-of-pearl shine under her eyes that meant that she'd been crying. There was a cut on her lip that looked as if she'd bitten it, but other than that she seemed unhurt. "Hermione," he said suddenly, turning towards her. "Look, you don't have to talk to me, but just tell me if you're all right. Just nod, will you?"

"Such concern," said a voice behind them. "How very endearing."

They both turned; Draco quickly, Hermione more slowly, as if she dreaded what she might see.

Salazar Slytherin stood at the foot of the stairs.

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Lupin looked up at the knock on his door. "Just a second," he called out, glancing around hastily. He hadn't really had time to straighten up his office since he'd discovered it wrecked the day before. He'd swept most of the shards of adamantine into a corner, and spent some time separating his papers into "ruined" and "not ruined" piles. A few spells had fixed the windows, and returned the nymph-who-looked-like-Lily's snow globe to something resembling its former condition (although the snow in the globe now had a tendency to look rather blue.)

Lupin reached out and yanked a copy of the Daily Prophet towards him, covering the pages of the book he was reading, or trying to read. It was the book the centaur had given him in the Forbidden Forest, and so far he'd had no luck trying to decipher what language it was written in. He'd tried Trollish, Mermish, Giantish, and even Elvish, to no effect.

"Come in," he called.

It was Fleur. She came in smiling, the light catching her silver hair,

turning it to tinsel. "Ello, Professor! You wanted to see me?"

"Fleur," he replied, with weary caution. "Yes. I wanted to ask you something."

She smiled at him. "Yes?"

"Do you know where Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy are?"

Her smile vanished, to be replaced by a pout. "No, I do not," she said. "Why would I?"

"Right." Lupin rubbed his eyes tiredly. He was fairly sure he could feel the beginnings of a headache coming on. "Have I mentioned that I know perfectly well that they sent you over here the other day to trick me into leaving my office? It seemed possible to me that they might have let you in on the rest of their plans."

"Maybe," said Fleur, batting her eyelashes, "It was just because I like you."

Lupin sighed. "Fleur," he said. "I told you. I'm a werewolf. That veela business doesn't work on me. Besides, I'm twice your age and I'm your teacher."

"I could take a different class," suggested Fleur.

"I'd still be a teacher here at this school," said Lupin. Now he was positive that he was getting a headache.

"Well, actually, as to that," said a voice from the corner.

Both Lupin and Fleur turned around. It was Sirius, of course, his head and shoulders visible in the fireplace. "I need to talk to you, Remus," he said.

Relieved, Lupin turned to Fleur. "If you'll excuse us?"

Fleur gave Lupin an appraising look. Then she gave Sirius an appraising look. Whatever it was she was thinking caused her to

smile broadly. She turned around, twitched her shoulders, and walked out, shutting the door behind her.

"Pretty girl," said Sirius.

"Quite," said Lupin, in a tone that suggested that that avenue of conversation was closed. "Are you back home, Sirius?"

"I'm at the Manor, with Narcissa," said Sirius, who looked tired. "We got back last night. I've sent the Aurors packing for the moment, and I've been up all night. I owed Dumbledore --"

"So did I."

"And I've owed Harry's friends -- I sent a message to Ron Weasley last night, since he's Harry's best friend I thought he might have an idea where he's gone."

"What does Dumbledore say?"

"He seems to think Harry's all right," said Sirius. "He's not worried."

"Good," said Lupin, trying to sound more optimistic than he felt.

"Did you go to the Forbidden Forest?"

"I did," said Lupin. He reached for the book and carried it over to the fire, where he showed it to Sirius and explained what the centaur had told him. Sirius looked at the book and shook his head. "Never seen anything like it," he said. "Not even during my Auror training. Are you sure that's a language? It just looks like squiggles."

"Oh, it's a language," said Lupin. "It's got recognizable patterns. But I'm damned if I've ever seen anything like it before. And considering that I only have half my books here, and half of those have been ruined--"

"Speaking of books," interrupted Sirius. "Look, I've just been talking to the Ministry about you --"

"About me?" said Lupin, thunderstruck.

"I'd really like you to come and stay with us here at the Manor."

Lupin stared. "What does that have to do with the Ministry?"

Sirius sighed. "The Aurors have been over this place with a fine-tooth comb -- they've taken Lucius' papers, and all the Dark Arts items he collected. But they haven't touched the library. There are thousands of books in the library here, many of them the only editions still in existence. It would take them months to sort and catalogue, and several of the Aurors have admitted that they've never seen half the languages represented here. So I thought of you. The Ministry is willing to pay you to assist in cataloguing Lucius' library--"

"I'm not an Auror," Lupin protested.

"We don't need an Auror," said Sirius. "We need someone who specializes in Dark Arts studies. An academic. Someone like you."

"I've got a job here, Sirius. I can't just leave."

"This job pays better," said Sirius. "And Dumbledore's happy to let you go. He said he's already found a replacement willing to take over your class."

"Who?" said Lupin, looking curious.

"Snape," said Sirius, grinning more than ever.

This time Lupin grinned back. "I can just see Fleur trying to lure him out of the office..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"So you'll come?"

"Of course I'll come."

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"This is an interesting turn of affairs," said Slytherin, in his harsh, inhuman voice. He stood very calmly at the foot of the stairs, looking tall and pale and deathly. He wore different robes than he had earlier; these were a much richer green, and fell in thick folds to the hem, which was edged in gold. I wonder if he dressed up to impress me? thought Hermione, feeling ill.

She glanced quickly at Draco, expecting to see him looking horrified, shocked, or simply amazed. But he looked none of those things. There was a look on his face that was strangely like -recognition. As if he'd bumped into someone he knew, someone he hadn't expected to ever see again.

"You," he said, staring at Slytherin. "I know you. But - you're dead. And you're short."

Slytherin gave him a cold smile.

"Oh yeah," said Draco, in the tone of one remembering something. "Platform boots, right?"

"Draco," hissed Hermione warningly. "Don't."

"So," said Draco, who seemed to be warming to his theme. "How'd that selling your soul to the Devil thing work out for you in the end? Because I can tell you, from where I've been standing, it didn't look like a terribly bright move."

"You," said Slytherin, not moving, "you know who I am, then?"

"You're my ancestor," said Draco. He reached behind him, and drew the sword out of its casing, holding it in front of him. "And I think this is yours."

"It is ours," said Slytherin. "You have my blood in you, boy. And now you have my dreams and my memories. Soon you will become

me."

Draco shook his head. "I really don't see that happening," he said, still holding the sword in front of him. Despite her horror, Hermione was impressed. He actually held it like he knew how to use it. Then she recalled the fencing-room at Malfoy Manor. Maybe he did know how to use it.

Slytherin smiled again, even more coldly. "You're a child," he said. "You cannot recognize the workings of destiny. You think it is chance that brought that sword to you? Or brought you here? Or brought you to her?" he said, glancing at Hermione. "I had thought she would love me. But that she should love you - that is even better. History repeating itself, the way it was meant to be."

"Okay, there's one thing I didn't factor into this," said Draco, staring at Slytherin. "You're a thundering lunatic."

Slytherin continued to smile.

"Hermione doesn't love me," said Draco. "Do you?" he said, swinging around and staring at her.

Hermione didn't say anything.

"Consider it a gift," said Slytherin, looking at Draco. "From me to you. Only one small example of what I can give you."

"Hermione?" said Draco again, looking shocked. He stepped towards her, just as she turned towards him, and the hilt of the sword collided with her arm.

She shrieked and jumped back, holding her wrist, where a red welt was rising.

"Rowena," barked Slytherin, in what almost sounded like alarm, and began to mount the stairs, his agitation evident.

"Get back," hissed Hermione, glaring at him in revulsion. She stepped backward, seizing Draco's sleeve with her unwounded arm,

almost pushing him behind her. As if she were trying to put herself between him and Slytherin. "Just get back."

Slytherin paused, looking up at them both out of dark, empty eyes. Then he reached into his voluminous sleeve, and withdrew an object that glittered darkly in the half-light. He held it tightly for a moment, looking at Draco. Then he said, "Here, boy. Catch." And threw it, hard, directly at Draco's face.

Automatically, Draco raised the hand that wasn't holding the sword, and caught the object out of the air. Then gasped, as he felt a sudden jerk behind his navel; the world suddenly peeled down the center like an orange, and his vision flooded with a blur of color. Portkey, he thought dizzily. He was aware of Hermione beside him, still clutching at his sleeve, and then the ground struck his feet, and he stumbled onto his knees, only just managing not to impale himself on the blade of the sword as he fell forward.

He glanced around, saw green grass growing up between cracked stone, saw a familiar, tumbledown wall, saw the line of trees that marked the beginning of the forest. And over the wall, he saw the tower from which they had just come. Slytherin had flung them outside the walls.

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Hermione stared around, dazed. She could tell that they were now outside the walls of the tower - but why? She looked over at Draco, who had dropped the sword into the grass and was gazing around, looking furious.

"Goddamn it!" he yelled suddenly. "I can't believe I fell for that! 'Here, catch!' That's the oldest trick in the book, right up there with 'Look out behind you!'"

"That thing he threw at you," she said, dazed. "Was that a Portkey?"

"Must have been," he said, staring down at the object that was clutched in his hand. He slowly opened his fingers and stared. It was a weathered piece of silver, in the shape of what looked like a bent,

sideways X. A loop at the top showed where a chain could be threaded through it. "Looks like a piece of cheap jewelry."

"I can't believe he just let us go," she said, suddenly.

Draco looked up, and frowned at her. "Hermione, he's madder than ...well, I can't think of anything right now, but he'd madder than some very, very mad thing. He's completely, utterly bonkers. Probably from having been dead so long."

"He is mad," she said quietly. "But he's quite determined, as well."

Draco got up, brushing grass off his clothes, and reached out a hand to help her up as well. She took it.

It was like an electric shock. She felt a jolt go through her as his hand met hers, felt the potion in her blood respond with a wave of heat and a sudden searing burst of longing.

She got slowly to her feet, staring at him. She could sense his confusion, worry and irritation - in fact, she felt as if every inch of her body was sensitized to what he might be feeling. The shock that had overwhelmed her when she had first seen him was beginning to wear off, to be replaced by a terrible, heavy, aching sort of weight. And a small, cold voice in the back of her mind was telling her that that weight would be relieved if she just went over to him and -

*No.*

She yanked her hand away. "Don't touch me."

He looked at her, bewildered and with a rising anger in his eyes. "What on earth is wrong with you, Hermione?"

"What's wrong with me?" she echoed, with a mirthless sort of laugh. "I love you, that's what's wrong with me."

Draco stared at her, looking as if he thought he hadn't heard her



correctly. "You what?"

"I love you."

He shook his head. "I don't --"

"I'm in love with you," she said.

He went white, startlingly white -- he looked more as if she had hit him than told him that she loved him. She felt as guilty as if she had hit him.

"No," he said. "You're in love with Harry."

"That's true," she said, clenching her fingers into fists of anxiety.

"That's true, but -- didn't you hear what Slytherin said, back there on the stairs?"

"I thought we'd established that he was a few sandwiches short of a picnic," said Draco. "And frankly, I'm starting to wonder a bit about you."

"Slytherin gave me a love potion," Hermione said, expressionlessly. "He meant for me to fall in love with him. It makes you fall in love with the first person you see after you drink it. Only the first person I saw," she took a deep breath, "was you."

He stared at her, looking utterly stunned. "A love potion," he repeated uncertainly.

She nodded. "Yes."

"And so now you love me? Because of a potion?"

"Yes," she said, again.

"But you didn't love me before," he said. "You didn't love me...before the potion?"

Hermione shook her head very slowly. "Not like this."

"Oh," he said blankly, and then, "How long is this meant to last for, Hermione?"

"I think," she said, "that it's meant to be permanent."

"Oh," he said again. He still looked stunned.

She reached out uncertainly towards him, and lightly took hold of his arm. The material of his jacket felt as rough as sand beneath her fingertips. She looked up into his face, and her heart turned over. It was as if her longing was so intense that it had a shape and a color of its own. "I'll figure out how to counteract it," she said desperately. "I know there's a way. But we can't tell Harry- -"

Draco looked startled. "Hermione, you have to tell him," he said, and she pulled back.

"What?"

"Are you really expecting him not to notice?" said Draco in a tight, strained voice. "He loves you. He notices everything you do. You think he's not going to notice this?"

"Notice what?" said Hermione stubbornly. "There's nothing to notice. Nothing is going to happen, except that I'm just going to have to suffer this -- this horrible mistake -- until we get home and I can figure out how to counteract the spell."

"Horrible mistake?" said Draco, with a very faint and unmirthful smile. "Ouch."

"All right, maybe I shouldn't have said 'horrible.' Maybe just 'mistake.'"

"Yes, that certainly makes it all better. Look, Hermione, I know you don't want to hurt him, but he'll understand that this is temporary and not your fault --"

"He'll be angry with me," said Hermione. "But I don't mind that. I

was thinking of you."

"Of me?"

"I don't want Harry to hate you. Because he needs you."

"Harry doesn't need me."

"Yes," she said. "He does."

"Hermione--" Draco passed a hand over his eyes, and sighed. "God, you're stubborn."

"He needs you," she repeated, her voice rising to a nearly hysterical pitch. "You know this will hurt him, and that it's you will make it worse-- everything's so fragile already, and with this --"

"Harry's not that fragile," he said.

"Well, neither am I," said Hermione. "And I can fight this. And I will."

"You think you can fight it?" said Draco, and now he looked angry. "You think you can fight what you feel, every second of every day, and pretend everything is fine, and it'll be easy?"

"It's not forever," she said. "It's just until I can reverse the spell."

"What if it can't be reversed?"

"Every spell can be reversed," she said.

"Not Avada Kedavra," he said, and she shivered.

"That's death," she said. "This is just a love spell."

He reached out and put a hand under her chin, tilting it so that she was forced to look at him. He was almost exactly the same height as Harry -- she had to look up, but not too far up, to see his eyes.

"What does it feel like?" he said.

"What does what feel like?" she asked, although she knew what he meant.

"The spell," he said.

She heard her own voice as if it came from far away. "When I look at you, I want to die."

He was still holding her face in his hands, and as he stared at her, she saw his eyes soften, silver turning to gray. "Don't look at me," he said. His voice was soft, too, a voice he never used with anyone but her. "Don't look at me, don't talk to me, don't even come near me. And I won't come near you. It's the only way."

"All right," said Hermione miserably. He was right; she didn't see what else they could do.

He let go of her, and she stepped back away from him.

"Let's go," he said.

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As they rounded the side of the tower, Hermione saw Harry and Ron, standing in front of the wall, looking anxiously up at it as if they expected her or Draco to appear on top of it at any moment. Ron was saying something to Harry, and Harry was shaking his head, not vehemently, but she could tell even from this distance that he was disagreeing firmly - and she paused there for a moment, just wanting to look at them - her two best friends in the world, whom she had been terrified she would never see again. Even the sight of them arguing with each other seemed unutterably endearing.

She glanced at Draco, who was looking at her with an unreadable expression. He caught her eye, then jerked his chin towards Ron and Harry, obviously indicating that she should notify them of her presence. She frowned at him, and turned back towards the two

boys.

"Ron!" she called, and then, louder, "Harry!"

Ron turned first, and saw her, and his blue eyes widened. And then Harry turned, and when she saw his face, and sudden wild happiness that flashed across it when he saw her, her knees gave out and she sat down hard on the ground.

She saw Harry break into a run, and then he had flung himself down beside her and was kneeling next to her in the grass. She saw him through unfocused eyes -- a Harry-shaped shadow, with a blur of untidy hair -- and then his arms were around her, and he was crushing her so tightly to him that she couldn't breathe. She threw her own arms around his shoulders, feeling him shaking, and realized -- with a mixture of wonder and horror -- that he was crying. Harry, who never cried, not even when he was eleven years old, not even in situations that would have made most children bawl like babies.

"*Harry*," she breathed.

"I thought you were dead," he said, into her hair. "I was sure of it."

"No -- Harry, I'm fine -- I'm perfectly all right."

He pulled away from her, just far enough to touch her face with his hand, running his finger over her cheekbone, down to her mouth. "You don't know what it was like --"

"Shh," she said, pulled his head down, and kissed him fiercely. "I'm fine."

In answer, he just held her tighter. She clutched him back, feeling a little of the poisonous fear that seemed to have seeped into her system along with the potion fade away. The familiarity of Harry's embrace was utterly comforting, because, she thought, how powerful could a love potion be when you were already in love with somebody else? And her love for Harry wasn't at all diminished; she knew that without even thinking about it. He was as much a part of

her as he had ever been. She lifted her face up to be kissed, holding him tightly as she did so, and thought, *I can beat this. This is going to be easy.*

\*\*\*

"Oh, this is just revolting," said Ron, who was standing with Draco near the wall. They'd turned their backs so that they could no longer see Harry and Hermione, but they could still hear them, and neither of them was very happy about it.

"Love is a beautiful thing, Weasley," said Draco, staring up at the sky.

"Not when it's your two best friends," said Ron. "Yech, I can hear the slobbering noises."

"Just try to think about other things."

"Oh, I've got lots to think about," said Ron, and now there was an edge to his voice. "Like you, and why you didn't come back for us like Harry asked you to."

"No time," said Draco, shortly.

"I don't believe that," said Ron.

"I really don't care," said Draco.

Ron looked irritable, but before he had the opportunity to say anything, there was a soft \*pop \* and Charlie Weasley Apparated into the clearing.

"Lo, Charlie," said Ron morosely.

Draco was startled. "It hasn't been that long, has it?"

"No," said Charlie, who was holding something in his hand -- a letter, Draco saw. It looked as if Charlie had already opened it and

read it. "But this came for you, Ron."

"Owl post?" said Ron, reaching for it curiously.

"It's from Sirius Black," said Charlie, looking faintly exasperated. "He was looking for Harry. He'd no idea where you'd all gone off to, of course. I finally wrung some information out of Ginny and wrote him a long letter back, but I'd still rather Harry wrote him as well. Where is Harry, anyway -- Good Lord!" exclaimed Charlie, catching sight of Harry and Hermione over Ron's shoulder. "Is that --"

"Hermione," said Ron flatly.

Charlie was still staring in astonishment. "I knew you came here looking for her, but I didn't know that Harry and Hermione were..." He blinked. "Harry and Hermione?"

"I take it you've let your subscription to Witch Weekly lapse," said Draco. "Or you'd already know about this."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Ages," said Ron, rolling his eyes.

"About fifteen minutes," said Draco.

"Not the er, kissing, I meant the relationship. You know what, never mind. I really don't need to know."

"We should really get back to the camp," said Draco.

"Right," said Charlie.

Nobody moved.

"You go get them," said Ron, grinning at Charlie. "You're in loco parentis around here."

"Can't be scarier than a lot of enraged dragons," pointed out Draco.

"I dunno," said Charlie. "I'd rather deal with a lot of enraged dragons than have to pry two lust-crazed adolescents off each other." He looked at Ron. "They're your best friends, you go peel them apart."

"Yeah, Weasley," said Draco. "What are you afraid of?"

"Spiders," said Ron. "Heights. The number thirteen. Peanut butter..."

"It was a rhetorical question, Weasley," interrupted Draco.

"Oh," said Ron.

"Peanut butter?" Draco said.

"Oh, just shut up, Malfoy."

\*\*\*

Harry, Hermione, Charlie, Ron and Draco sat around the small kitchen table in Charlie's tent. Charlie himself was utterly silent while the four of them told him everything that had happened. Harry and Hermione sat together at one end of the table, their hands interlaced over the arm of Hermione's chair. Ron sat opposite them, and Draco had pushed his chair back, away from the table, turned it around, and folded his arms over the back. He looked unconcerned, but Hermione had noticed that so far he hadn't looked at her once. He was living up to his end of the bargain, anyway, she thought. Even if she wasn't. Not quite.

"Salazar Slytherin," said Charlie, shaking his head in wonder. He looked over at Draco. "Well, I suppose from now on you can say you defeated the most evil wizard in history."

"I suppose I did," said Draco, looking rather cheerful. "If, that is, you mean defeated in the sense of 'having met'."

"He let us go," said Hermione, in a dead sort of voice. "We didn't defeat him."



"Although I made a lot of very cutting remarks and I'm pretty sure I wounded his feelings severely," Draco pointed out.

"Let you go?" said Ron, looking puzzled. "Why on earth would he let you go?"

"No idea," said Draco.

Hermione looked at him, then quickly away. So far, they hadn't mentioned the love potion - she'd left it entirely out of her version of events, although she had told them everything else. It weighed on her; in fact, she felt as if she were carrying around an enormous brick with the words LYING TO HARRY emblazoned across it. But she didn't see what else she could possibly do. "Maybe he realized I wouldn't make a good Source after all," she said weakly.

"Maybe he didn't like the look of that sword," said Harry, jerking his chin towards Draco. "Remember what Lupin said, that sword can kill anything, even the risen dead."

Hermione shuddered.

"Maybe," said Ron quietly, "Malfoy convinced him to let them go."

They all swung around and looked at him in astonishment.

"You had plenty of time in there by yourself, didn't you, Malfoy?" said Ron, in the same quiet voice. "Did you make some kind of deal with him?"

Even Draco looked shocked. "Deal?" he said, blankly.

"Well, you didn't come back to get us," said Ron, still looking at Draco. "You must have been doing something all that time."

"Ron," said Harry. "If Malfoy didn't come back to get us, I'm sure he had a good reason." Harry looked squarely at Draco. "Didn't you?"

Hermione watched Draco out of the corner of her eye as all the color drained out of his face. "I couldn't," he said haltingly. "The veelas-

"Fine," said Harry, without rancor. "It doesn't really matter, does it?" he added, looking at Ron. "If Hermione's all right?"

In answer, Ron pushed his chair back from the table and walked out of the room.

Harry watched him go, biting his lip. "He's acting so strange-" he burst out, with vexation. "Something's bothering him."

"Let me guess," said Charlie. "He's moody, irritable, snaps at everyone, and spends a lot of time staring off angrily into space."

"Yeah," said Harry. "What's that about?"

Charlie shrugged. "He's sixteen," he said.

"So am I sixteen," said Harry. "So is Malfoy."

"Yes, well, neither of you is exactly normal, are you?" pointed out Charlie.

"Cheers, Charlie," said Draco, with a half-smile.

"Oh, you know. The famous Harry Potter, and Malfoy, you're pretty famous yourself these days, what with recent events. I might have let my subscription to Witch Weekly lapse, but I do read the Daily Prophet. You two going off to Magid school made front-page news."

Hermione glanced at Harry, and saw that he was smiling. "What?" she said, curiously. "Is that funny?"

"No," said Harry, "it's just -" he paused, and looked down at the table. She got the feeling he was reluctant to say whatever it was he wanted to say with Draco there, but he seemed determined to forge ahead anyway. "When we realized that someone had kidnapped you," he said to Hermione, without actually looking at her, "I just assumed it was to get to me."

"It didn't have anything to do with you, Harry," she said quickly.

"I know," he said. "That's why I was smiling. I know it might seem strange, but it's a relief for me to know that even though you were in danger, it wasn't because of me, or who I am."

"Ahem," said Charlie, looking faintly embarrassed. "Perhaps I should leave you two to talk alone?"

Hermione glanced up quickly, and saw, with a shocked sort of pang, that Draco had gone - had left the room so quietly that none of them had even noticed his departure.

"That's okay, Charlie," she said. "It's your kitchen, isn't it? Besides, I'm so tired, all I want to do is go to sleep."

Charlie pushed his chair back. "All right. I'll take you to your tent, then."

\*\*\*

When Ron walked into Charlie's living room, he found Ginny curled up on the couch reading a copy of Teen Witch Weekly that she'd scrounged from under Charlie's sofa. She had refused to sit in the kitchen with the rest of them; she was still furious about having been left out of their expedition.

"Lo, Gin," said Ron, warily.

Ginny glared at her magazine with narrowed dark eyes. "You're a huge bastard, Ron," she said, without looking up. "And I hate you."

"Ginny...I told you I was sorry. Charlie said we had to go without you."

"Well, it wasn't so bad." Ginny's face, which had been scowling, broke into a reluctant smile. "I got to feed the dragons."

"By yourself?"

"No, with two of Charlie's friends. Cute young wizards in leather

trousers. It wasn't the worst day I've ever had."

Ron rolled his eyes. "I'm glad you stayed out of trouble."

Ginny's mirthful expression softened into a slight frown, and she glanced past Ron to the kitchen. Charlie looked extremely grave, Harry only slightly less so. Hermione simply looked exhausted. "Is it true, about Salazar Slytherin coming back?" said Ginny to Ron, in a half-whisper. "I was listening, but I wasn't sure I heard right."

"That's what Hermione says," said Ron. "And she's not an exaggerator. And Malfoy backs her up," he shrugged, "not that that means anything, really, since he lies like most people breathe. But I can't see any reason for him to be lying right now."

Ginny shuddered. "I remember the statue of Slytherin from the Chamber of Secrets...he had such a cruel, horrible face."

Ron glanced away from her, towards the silver mirror on the wall that gave him back his own reflection: tired, pale and worried.

"Good Lord, you're tall," said the mirror, in a purring sort of voice. "You know what they say about tall men."

Ron jumped hastily back and out of the mirror's line of sight. As he did so, Draco came out of the kitchen, gave Ron an unpleasant look, and rather ostentatiously leaned over the back of the sofa to see what Ginny was reading. "That Cute Boy in Potions - Seven Simple Spells to Make Him Notice You," he read, and raised an eyebrow at her.

Ginny blushed. "Love spells are a myth anyway," she said.

"Are they?" said Draco, and neatly plucked the magazine out of her hands. "There wouldn't be anything in this about how to reverse love spells, would there?"

Ginny snorted. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

"Good point," said Draco. "Thanks for the magazine," he added,

waved it at her, and walked out of the tent.

Ginny looked at Ron. "He took my magazine," she said, surprised.

"Right," said Ron. "I'll go beat him up until he gives it back, then," and ducked out of the tent after Draco, Ginny's howl of "*Ron! I was only joking!*" trailing after him.

It was nearly sunset, and the sky above the camp was beginning to darken with faint lines like the markings inside a seashell. Draco was walking so quickly away from the tent that it took Ron - whose long legs usually allowed him to move faster than anyone - several moments to catch up.

"Malfoy," he said. "Hold up."

Draco kept walking.

"Malfoy," said Ron, more sharply, reached out, and put his hand on Draco's arm.

Draco whirled on him. His face was expressionless, although if Ron had known him as well as Hermione or Harry did, he would have seen by the look in his eyes that he was spoiling for a fight.

"Why are you pretending that I'm not here?" snapped Ron.

"Wishful thinking?" Draco suggested.

Ron ignored this. "I want a word with you, Malfoy."

"That depends," said Draco. "Are you going to say something useful, or are you just going to glare at me and be cryptic?"

"Back in the forest," said Ron. "I was watching you."

"I never knew it gave you pleasure to gaze upon me, Weasley, but far be it from me to interfere with your harmless pleasures. Come around my tent tonight, I'll let you watch me take a shower."

"I was watching you when you were in the garden," said Ron. "I saw you talking to the veela. Then you walked off. You walked off," he repeated, his voice rising. "You should have come back for Harry and me. At least for Harry."

Draco smiled. In the mood he was in, the idea of a fight with Ron gave him a thrill of dark elation. "It's not your business what I do, Weasley," he said. "Is it?"

"It is my business," said Ron. "These are my friends we're talking about. And maybe you can fool Hermione -- she's got a massive blind spot where you're concerned-- and you can fool Harry, because he trusts everyone, and you can even fool Charlie with your stupid dragons, but you can't fool me, Malfoy. I know what you are."

"And I know what you are," said Draco. "An inbred cretin with an inferiority complex the size of Brighton. Tell me, when are you going to admit that this is all because you're jealous?"

Ron went white. "I'm jealous? You're the one who's in love with Hermione. I bet it just killed you that she chose Harry, didn't it? And you just couldn't wait to take the first opportunity that came along to cut him out--"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Come on, Weasley, you're not any better at psychological warfare than you are at cunning plans. I suggest you get out of here before you get hurt."

"What are you going to do?" sneered Ron. "Hit me with your rolled-up copy of Witch Weekly?"

"Oh, I'm not going to hit you," said Draco, his voice alive with menace. He was looking at Ron with an expression that Ron hadn't seen on Draco's face for a while now. "I wouldn't bother hitting you. None of us can be bothered with you, haven't you noticed that? You think it's killing me to see Harry and Hermione together? I think it's killing you. You've never mattered, your whole life you've never mattered; the only thing that has ever mattered about you is Harry. If anyone at school knows your name, it's because of Harry. If you've ever won a point for your house, it's because of Harry. If you've ever

passed a class, it's because Hermione helped you. The only thing that's ever been special about you, Weasley, is your friends. And now they've got each other and they don't need you anymore, or want you around--"

"*Shut up!*" yelled Ron, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. "Just shut up, Malfoy, or I swear, I'll rip out your throat!"

Before Draco could respond, there was a rustle behind them and Ginny burst out into the clearing. "What's going on?" she demanded. "What on earth are you two yelling at each other about?"

Ron ignored her. "One of these days," he said to Draco, "They're all going to realize what you're really like - Harry, Hermione, even Sirius. And I'm going to be there to watch."

"Ron," said Ginny, sounding shocked. "Don't--"

But Draco cut her off. "It's all right, Ginny," he said, still looking at Ron.

He turned on his heel and walked away, vanishing quickly from sight as the black of his clothing blended into the darkness of the gathering shadows.

Ron was looking at Ginny. "Don't you go after him, Ginny--"

But she was already gone.

Ron sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, watching her go.

\*\*\*

"Narcissa!"

Sirius came skidding around the hallway corner to find Narcissa, her hair in businesslike plaits, wearing a patched robe and a determined expression, pointing her wand at one of the huge gold-framed family portraits that lined the corridor. When she caught sight of

him, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Sirius! What?"

Sirius skated to a halt in front of her and leaned his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "This house is far too big," he complained. "I think it crosses an international time zone. When it's three o'clock in the drawing room, it's six o'clock in the library."

"Harry and Draco are all right," said Narcissa, immediately.

He straightened up. "How'd you guess?"

"Because you wouldn't cracking jokes, otherwise. Did you hear from them?"

"From Charlie Weasley," he said, handing her a letter. "They're with him at that dragon camp he runs. Not all that far from here, actually. He says they're all perfectly fine. And goes into quite a bit more detail, actually...read it."

He watched some of the lines of strain vanish from her face as she read the letter. When she was done, she handed the letter back to him and smiled. "Well, goodbye," she said.

Sirius blinked at her. "Goodbye?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're going to go rushing off to Harry, aren't you? To make sure he's all right. It's fine. You should go."

"No," said Sirius. "I'm not."

Narcissa blinked at him. "You're not?"

"No," said Sirius. "Okay," he admitted, "I really, really want to. But I won't."

"Why not? There's no harm in being protective."

Sirius sighed and leaned back against the wall. "I know," he said.



"And most of me wants to rush down there, drag him back here, and lock him in his room until he's thirty. But the only effect that would have is that he'd get loads of practice using his Magid skills to break out. I have to show him I trust him, Narcissa."

"Hasn't he just betrayed that trust?" she asked, looking curious.

"Not really." Sirius looked thoughtful. "He's being true to his nature. The impression I get is that he thought his friend was in trouble - not just his friend, but his girlfriend. He's never learned to go to adults for help, and I think that by this stage, he's too old to learn it. He's not just any boy, he's Harry Potter. He might be a child, but he's got adult-sized problems, he always has, and so far he's dealt with them on his own. And dealt with them well. All I can really give him is support, and maybe a modicum of discipline. He's never going to have an ordinary life; there's no point in my treating him like he's an ordinary teenager."

"It's not easy," said Narcissa, sympathetically, "being godfather to a hero, is it?"

"No," said Sirius. "I'd much rather he was some swotty little weed who never left the library."

Narcissa laughed, "Sirius! You'd hate that!"

Sirius grinned. "Yeah, I would." He looked at her curiously. "I meant to ask before," he said. "What are you doing, anyway?"

"I was marking the objects I want to sell," she said calmly, and touched the tip of her wand to a painting of a dour-looking, pale man in a long black cloak. Immediately, the frame began to glow a faint blue color. "Take that, Uncle Vlad."

"You're selling off the paintings? Why?" asked Sirius. It was on occasions like this that it was recalled forcefully to him that he really didn't know Narcissa all that well. Although she did look fetching with her hair in plaits.

"I told you before," said Narcissa, moving down the hall and zapping

another portrait. "The Malfoy estate is worth a great deal, but most of its worth is bound up in objects. Paintings, furniture, gold...I want to have some liquid capital for Draco to use."

"When does he come into possession of all this?" asked Sirius, looking around curiously.

"Half when he's eighteen, the rest when he's twenty-one."

"Eighteen?" Sirius whistled. "That's young to be worth--"

"Seventy-five million galleons," said Narcissa.

Sirius choked. "*Seventy-five million?*"

"That's counting the worth of the estates in Romania and Turkmenistan as well, of course," she said calmly.

"Good Lord," said Sirius, and leaned back against the wall. "Do you think there's anything we can do to keep him from becoming a complete and utter pill?"

Narcissa put her hands on her hips. "My son is not a pill," she said.

"Not yet," said Sirius. "But all that money and power--"

"Doesn't even begin to make up for all the things he hasn't had!" said Narcissa, her expression stormy.

"You're feeling guilty," said Sirius.

Narcissa looked at him for a moment, then sighed and ran the back of her hand across her forehead. "I know I am."

"It's all right," said Sirius. "I feel just as guilty about all the things Harry hasn't had."

"But you were in prison--"

"So were you," said Sirius.

Narcissa sighed. "I suppose that's true."

"They're both," said Sirius slowly, "really exceptional boys. And if we can keep them from getting themselves killed-"

"Or killing each other," put in Narcissa.

"Then they'll practically raise themselves."

They looked at each other. Sirius was the first to smile, and Narcissa smiled back. "We're in big trouble, aren't we?" he said.

"Yes," she agreed. "When are they coming home?"

"Tomorrow morning. And they're with their friends. The Weasley boy, his sister, and Hermione, of course. That won't be a problem, will it?"

"This house has thirty-seven bedrooms," said Narcissa. "It's no problem at all."

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Ginny eventually found Draco lying sprawled on top of a large, flat rock some way from the tents. He was lying on his stomach and appeared to be calmly perusing her copy of Teen Witch Weekly. She knew that he saw her, although how she knew that she couldn't have said.

She climbed up on top of the rock and sat down next to him, looking down at the top of his silvery-blond head, which was resting on his folded hands.

"So," she said. "Learn anything from the magazine?"

"Not to wear horizontal stripes," he said. "They'll make me look chubby."

"Please, you could never look chubby. You're - oh, never mind, you

weren't serious, were you?"

"No, but I'm very serious about taking this Personality Quiz. This week's topic: 'Are You Too Forward When It Comes To Meeting Boys?'"

Ginny grinned. "So? Are you?"

"Apparently," said Draco, "which is rather bewildering, but never let it be said that I do not answer magazine poll questions honestly."

"Let me see that," Ginny said, taking the magazine away from him. She giggled. "According to the quiz, you should learn to stop fixating on the pretty boys and appreciate the less flashy but potentially more stable blokes all around you. 'Because after all, that nice shy boy who sits behind you in Potions might just be your soulmate.'"

"Harry sits behind me in Potions," said Draco darkly.

"Aw, how cute," said Ginny. "You hate him, he hates you, all those years...then, suddenly, love blossoms."

"Indeed," said Draco, leaning back on his elbows. "So, do you think he'd prefer candy or flowers? Or just a nice romantic dinner out? Although his table manners are atrocious. Have you seen him eat soup?"

Ginny giggled despite herself.

"See," Draco said. "I told you if I ever tried to be funny around you, you'd be rolling on the ground laughing."

"I am not rolling," said Ginny, trying to compose herself.

"And I'm not really trying," said Draco, and sat up, stretching his legs out in front of him. He looked over at her, and, even though he didn't change expression, she felt suddenly sober.

"Ron was being a right git before," she said. "I'm sorry."

Draco didn't reply. She looked over at him and saw that he was staring blankly off at the darkening line of trees in the distance.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I was pondering the immortal words of Julius Caesar when he said 'Brutus! You stabbed me in the back, you bastard.'"

"I don't think I remember that from my edition of Shakespeare," said Ginny, stifling a smile.

"I'm paraphrasing."

"Harry doesn't think you did anything wrong," said Ginny. "Don't let Ron talk you into feeling guilty."

"I don't feel guilty," said Draco, in a rather muffled voice.

"I have six older brothers," said Ginny, with asperity. "I know what boys are like when they're feeling guilty. They crawl away and curl themselves up into miserable little balls and insist they want to be left alone -- which is what you're doing."

"I didn't tell you to leave me alone," Draco said.

Ginny looked at him sideways. Empirically speaking, he was better-looking than Harry was, she thought, although his face lacked the heartbreaking transparency of Harry's -- it was impossible to tell what Draco was thinking, impossible to tell whether he was amused, bored, or hurt. Or maybe it was just that his face was new to her, while she had memorized Harry's. Comparisons are silly, she told herself sternly. Stop that.

"You look tired," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "I am tired."

"Are you still having nightmares?" she asked, in a small voice.

When he spoke again, it was in a flat tone, and she knew immediately that he was lying. "Just your run-of-the-mill bad dreams," he said. "Academic failure. Falling off my broomstick. Suddenly realizing I'm wearing tweed out of season."

Ginny laughed. Draco looked at her sidelong, a smile quirking the corner of his mouth. "You have a nice laugh," he said. "Sorry, by the way, to whinge all over you."

"That's all right," said Ginny, feeling a sudden fluttering in the pit of her stomach. She smiled at him. "Don't you have any pithy sayings or useful quotes from your father that would be helpful right now?"

"For some reason, the only one of my father's sayings that seems to be sticking in my head right now is when he told me 'There's always a light at the end of the tunnel. Of course, it's usually an oncoming express train.'"

"That's not very encouraging," said Ginny dubiously.

"No," Draco agreed. "No, it really isn't."

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Hermione walked into the tent she was to share with Ginny, and looked around wearily. Inside, it was a cozy little room with two small beds, and a desk in one corner with a cracked but clean round mirror hanging over it. Moving slowly, every bone in her body aching with tiredness, she walked over to the desk and sat down. She could see her reflection in the mirror, although not very well. A long crack down the middle of the mirror split her face into two uneven parts. That's me, she thought grimly. Split in half.

She pulled out one of the drawers of the desk, and found what she was looking for: a parchment, ink bottle, and quills. She laid them out on the desk and stared at them. Somehow, the sight was comforting; it always helped her to have something concrete to occupy her hands and mind. She picked up the quill, dipped it in the ink bottle and started to write.

She was on her third sheet of parchment when the door of the tent opened and she turned slowly, expecting to see Ginny.

It was Harry.

She stared at him, really seeing him, she thought, for the first time that day. When she had first seen him, she had been too overwhelmed by the shock of seeing him again to really take in anything about him, and in Charlie's tent she had been concentrating too hard on not looking at Draco. But Draco wasn't here now; no one was here now, and for the first time in three weeks, she was alone with Harry.

She should have been pleased, she thought. But instead she was - terrified. He walked across the room to her and leaned on the back of her chair, looking over her shoulder at their reflections in the mirror. She could see his face reflected, and thought he even looked a little older. Less like himself, and more like a photograph of himself - or a photograph of James.

He saw her looking at him in the mirror and smiled. "What?"

"You're taller," she said, without thinking. "How could you have gotten taller in only two weeks?"

"Concentrated effort."

"And you're so brown," she said. "And you have freckles on your nose."

"I know," he said, looking downcast. "Are they horrible?"

"No. I like them. But you look so tired."

"Three days of gut-wrenching misery and turmoil will do that," he said, frowned and squinted upward. "I think I got a white hair, actually. I was going to name it after you."

"Oh, very funny," said Hermione. She swiveled around in the chair and looked up at him. "I'm sorry you were worried," she said, more

seriously. "I've spent the past six years worrying over you, so I know what it feels like."

Harry didn't look as if he had heard her. "I got away from Charlie for a few minutes because I wanted to tell you something," he said. "Actually, I wanted to show you something."

She smiled at him. She hoped it didn't look like a nervous smile. "And I bet you say that to all the girls."

Harry didn't smile. Apparently he wasn't in the mood to be teased. He had the expression he always got when he was trying to work up the nerve to say something serious. No, she prayed. Not now. Not anything serious. Not now.

He reached a hand into his jacket pocket and drew out a folded piece of paper, which he handed to her. It was creased and shiny from being read and re-read. Hermione took it curiously, unfolded it, and blinked.

It was the letter that she had written while under the Imperius Curse, telling Harry that she was leaving him for Viktor. She had no memory of writing the words, and saw her own shaky handwriting with wonder: I saw Viktor this afternoon, and realized that I have really loved him all these years ... you will always be a dear friend of mine.... Please don't try to contact me.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, looking up at him in horror. "You can't tell me that you believed one word of this for even one minute!"

"Well, that's just it," said Harry. "I did."

Hermione was dismayed. "You did?"

"At first I was just shocked. I didn't want to believe it, but every time I told myself it was impossible I started to worry that I was rationalizing. Being arrogant. Making assumptions about you, like I used to...assuming that you felt a certain way about me, when really-- "



"But the *Mirror*, Harry-"

"Yes, but we weren't speaking then, were we?" he said simply. "And I thought, maybe you seeing me in the Mirror just meant you wanted out friendship back the way it was, and not...anything else."

"And then what?" said Hermione, exasperated. "I was just too embarrassed to correct your mistaken impression that I loved you, so I went along with it?"

"Well," said Harry, looking as if he felt rather small, "Yes."

"Harry, if you thought that, you're a complete dunce," said Hermione, firmly. "Let me guess. Ron convinced you that you were being an idiot."

"Actually, it was Malfoy."

"Draco?" said Hermione faintly. Oh, why did Harry have to bring him up? Of all the things she didn't want to talk about.

"Yes. He was...for some reason...utterly positive you weren't acting of your own free will. He called me a lot of names...kicked me around a bit...well, you know how he is. But I think it was just what I needed. I was..."

"Being utterly ridiculous?" said Hermione, with a wan smile.

"Afraid," said Harry. He took a deep breath, and said hastily, "I've learned enough about myself, Hermione, to know what really scares me. And that's just one thing. The idea of losing my family -- again. And that's Ron, and Sirius...and you. You're my family, Hermione. You're everything to me."

Hermione burst into tears.

Harry looked utterly appalled. "*Hermione* -"

Hermione shook her head violently. She was temporarily incapable of speech, which on reflection was probably not a bad thing.

Awkwardly, Harry reached out and stroked her hair and the side of her face, and she fleetingly wondered why it was that Harry was awkward with her, even now, when Draco never was, never made a single move that didn't seem purposeful and meant, or a single hesitant gesture, and why did she have to think about him right now when she should be thinking of nothing but Harry?

"I'm sorry," he said gently. "After all you've been through, and I'm blithering on about letters and Malfoy and nothing very important..."

"I don't want to talk about Malfoy," interrupted Hermione tearfully, stood up, and kissed him. She felt his hands slide up her arms, the familiar pressure as he cupped the back of her head, reaching up to pull the chopsticks out of her hair and tossing them aside, letting her hair fall down around them. He was still Harry, so familiarly Harry in that way that wrenched at her heart, the feel of him the same, the fine slender bones of his hands and wrists and face, the untidy hair that brushed her hands. She slid her fingers lightly down his back, knowing she ought to touch him, but feeling as if she hadn't any right...

*This is worse than the Cruciatus Curse, Hermione thought miserably. This is awful.*

"Hermione," said Harry softly, pulling away from her.

"What?"

"You're crying."

"I'm sorry..."

"No. Don't be." He pulled her closer to him, threading his hands into her hair, and kissed her eyes and the tip of her nose. "It's all right," he said. "I'm never going to not trust you again."

*But it's not all right, Harry, she thought miserably. It is very much not all right.*

They both heard the door being opened at the same time, and turned their heads to see Charlie enter, carrying what looked like a pile of clothes. He glanced at them, and said resignedly, "At it again, are we?"

"We're not 'at' anything," said Harry, with dignity, although he stepped away from Hermione. "We were just talking."

"That's right," said Charlie, with a grin. "You just got to talking, suddenly tripped, and fell on each other's lips. Happens all the time." He tossed the pile of clothes onto the bed, and said, "Hermione, I've brought you and Ginny some old t-shirts to sleep in. I'm sorry if they're a bit ratty, but it's all I've got. Harry, get along with you. Back to the boys' tent."

"Goodnight, Harry," said Hermione, a little too quickly. She felt, rather than saw, Harry look at her with a quizzical expression on his face, but she didn't return his glance.

He bent and kissed her lightly on the temple. "Sleep well," he said.

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Remus Lupin had never before been to Malfoy Manor, but he if he had, he would have been astonished upon arriving there, battered leather case in tow, to see how much it had changed.

The giant spiders were gone, as was the vicious attack topiary, the spiky portcullis, the magical land-mines and the Jigsaw Hexes. The Bottomless Pit was still there, although Aurors from the Ministry of Magic had surrounded it with blinking signs that read "Danger: Approach And Risk Hurtling Through Empty Space For All Eternity." The Venus Flytraps and black hedgerows starred with malignant-looking flowers had been replaced with neat herbaceous borders that would one day sprout daisies, if Narcissa had her way.

When Lupin Apparated into the drawing-room, he found Sirius waiting for him there, wearing a white shirt, black trousers, and an ear-to-ear grin. "Harry's all right!" he announced, by way of a greeting. "So is Draco."

"They're all right?" echoed Lupin, astonished and relieved "How do you know?"

"I owled Ron Weasley yesterday," said Sirius, taking Lupin's case from him and indicating that his friend should follow him upstairs. "I figured if anyone might know where Harry would be, his best friend would. Anyway, I got a letter back this morning from Charlie Weasley - they were with him at that dragon camp he runs. I owled him back, and he's sending them home tomorrow morning. He says they're all perfectly fine."

"They went to look for Hermione," Lupin said, feeling both relieved and disquieted. "Didn't they?"

"Yes, and she's with them now," said Sirius, turning a corner. As they passed through the halls of the Manor, Lupin noted the suspiciously light square patches on the walls where various portraits had been removed, and the score marks along the floors where heavy furniture had been dragged away. "And according to Charlie, they're all in excellent health. Of course, when Harry gets here tomorrow, I'm going to kill him, so the point is moot."

Despite his feeling of anxiety, Lupin laughed.

"What?" said Sirius.

"You," said Lupin. "Being a disciplinarian."

"I know," said Sirius gloomily, pausing in front of a large oak door and pulling a ring of keys out of his pocket. "What can I tell him? When I was your age, I never would have dreamed off sneaking away from school in the middle of the night and not telling anyone where I was going, and oh, by the way, there's a spot on the North Tower that affords an excellent view right into the Ravenclaw girls' showers."

"I think it was the Hufflepuff girls," said Lupin. "Not that I know what you're talking about, because I don't."

"And then there's Draco," Sirius added, even more gloomily. He found the correct key and inserted it into the lock. The door swung open. "I haven't the faintest idea what to say to him, and Narcissa won't be any help. She feels so guilty about Lucius and everything that happened that she wouldn't discipline him if he burned the house down."

Lupin whistled as they walked into the room beyond the door. It was Lucius' library; an enormous, hexagonal room with a ceiling that disappeared into darkness and dust motes far above. Huge bookshelves lined the walls, reaching so high above their heads that the tallest shelves could only be reached by climbing the carved mahogany ladders, kept upright by magic, that were ranged around the room at intervals. Lupin could tell just by looking at the spines of the books that many of them were incredibly ancient and rare.

"The Aurors have been stripping this place down," Sirius remarked, following Lupin's gaze. "Took away most of Lucius' papers, his Dark Arts toys, all sorts of nasty torture devices. But Dumbledore convinced them to leave the books here. "

Lupin looked at him. "Why?"

"I think he was hoping you'd find something here to help explain what's been going on lately," said Sirius quietly. "You know how he is - he won't say anything directly. But I know he thinks that all these recent events are related - the dementors' disappearance, the disturbances in the Forbidden Forest, and now all this about Salazar Slytherin being back -"

"Do you have that book with you?" interrupted Sirius, looking suddenly curious.

Lupin took the book out of his case and handed it to Sirius, who took it and walked with it across the room to one of the long stained-glass windows (green and blue, they showed an intricate

design of letter "M"s). He opened it, and frowned at the pages. "You're right," he said. "I've never seen anything like this before." He glanced up. "Firenze said this would help explain things?"

"Yes," said Lupin, hesitantly, remembering the centaur's actually words with a chill of foreboding. Nothing will help you now. "Although he didn't seem terribly optimistic..."

"No, they rarely are," said Sirius, closing the book and laying it down on the desk. "They're a depressing lot, although very sincere about paying back favors. Which reminds me," he added, sitting down at the desk and putting his chin on his hand. He looked thoughtfully at Lupin. "I was thinking of having a birthday party for Harry."

"What?" said Lupin, startled by this sudden change of subject.

"As far as I can tell, he's never had a birthday party, never even had his birthday acknowledged before. And he's going to be seventeen, that's quite an important age..."

"Well, by all means have one," said Lupin. "What's it got to do with me?"

"Well, you did teach at Hogwarts, I thought, if you could remember who any of his friends were-"

Lupin snorted. "Don't try to get me involved in party planning, Sirius," he said. "The last party I was at was James' bachelor party, and that was twenty years ago."

"And yet I remember it like it was yesterday," said Sirius, with a grin.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "I'd be shocked if you remembered any of it. In my recollection, you got thoroughly pissed, stood on your head in the front garden, and sang eighteen verses of a song entitled 'I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep But I've Got An Enormous Broom'. Then we had to carry you home."

"That song," said Sirius with dignity, "only has fifteen verses."

"Then you made up the last three."

"Did they rhyme?"

"Sirius..."

"You brought it up," said Sirius, and made a face. "See, that's what I'm talking about. How am I supposed to be any sort of moral example to Harry? I never had a moral example when I was his age, except maybe James, and what can I say about that? 'Be like your father'?"

"He could do a lot worse," said Lupin.

"I know," said Sirius. "But he's never known his father, so will it really mean anything to him?" He sighed. "I want him to be happy here, Remus, but I just don't know. I even thought of putting in a Quidditch field in the back garden. There's plenty of room."

"I never thought you were much of a Quidditch enthusiast," said Lupin.

"No, but I thought it was something Draco and Harry might like to have," said Sirius.

"Good Lord, they'll be living here together, won't they?" said Lupin, looking as if this novel concept had only just occurred to him. "It'll take a lot more than a Quidditch field to keep the peace between those two. I suppose the length of about eight Quidditch fields might do it, mind, if Harry stood on one side and Draco on the other."

Sirius smiled at him. "You just don't believe me that they're friends, do you?"

Lupin shrugged. "It's not me you have to convince," he said. "It's them."

\*\*\* Draco sleeping \*\*\*

*He walked through the gardens of the tower in the forest, only now it was whole and unruined and the gardens were alive with flowers. None of it seemed strange to him, only wholly familiar, as if he were revisiting a place he had been many times.*

*He was eager to get inside, why he wasn't sure. He walked swiftly through the gardens, mounted the steps that he had last seen cracked and broken, and went through the open double doors of the tower into an anteroom hung with tapestries and glowing the candelight.*

*Hermione was waiting for him there. He knew it was Hermione, although she looked very different. Her hair was plaited on top of her head with thick robes of sparkling emeralds, and she wore a long green silk dress tasselled with gold. She looked almost completely, although not quite entirely, unlike herself. She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as though she kissed him every day.*

*"Hello, love," he heard himself say. It wasn't what he had planned to say. He had wanted to ask her why she was all dressed up, were they going somewhere? But that wasn't what came out when he opened his mouth. "Did you miss me?"*

*"I always miss you when you're gone," she said, pulled back a little, and made a face. "But look - you're all bloody."*

*"Yes," he heard himself say. "It just won't wash out."*

*She reached up and touched his face, and as she did so, he saw that there was a scar on the inside of her wrist. He tried to lean closer to see it, but his dream-self wasn't cooperating. "This are better now," he heard himself say. "Aren't they?"*

*"You mean since you killed him?" said Hermione, looking cheerful. "Oh, yes. Things are much better now."*



He jerked away from her. "What? Who did I kill?" he demanded, and it wasn't his dream-self speaking, it was himself now. He saw her eyes widen in surprise, and then she spun away from him, vanishing along with the richly decorated staircase, the walls, and the rest of the dream.

He opened his eyes. He was staring at the black night sky carpeted with stars. When he rolled over, he saw that he was lying on the ground at the base of the rock he'd been sitting on earlier with Ginny. He had no memory of having fallen asleep there, no memory in fact of even having fallen asleep at all. One of his arms was under his head, the other, stretched out next to him, clutched the hilt of Slytherin's sword.

He sat up slowly, aware that he was drenched in cold sweat. He looked down at the sword. "I thought we were done with all that nightmare business," he said to it. "Am I ever going to get another peaceful night's sleep as long as I have you?" The green jewels in the hilt glittered up at him like winking eyes.

"Who did I kill?" he asked it. "Who did I kill?"

But he knew.

\*\*\*

Not long after Harry and Charlie had departed, Ginny came into the tent, whistling softly and looking buoyant. Hermione, who had already put on one of Charlie's pullovers and was lying in bed, turned on her side and at looked at Ginny quizzically. "You seem awfully cheerful," she said.

Ginny flopped down on the bed opposite her and kicked off her shoes. "I am, a bit," she confessed. "In fact, there's something I wanted to tell you." She paused, and looked guilty. "Although, you're the one who ought to get to talk," she said, hastily. "I mean, after what you've been through-

"No," said Hermione, automatically. "No, I really don't want to talk about it."

Ginny crawled under the covers with her clothes on, looking dubious. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm completely sure," said Hermione. "In fact, if you have something pleasant to tell me, I'd love to hear it. I could do with a bit of cheering up."

"Okay," said Ginny, and said, very quickly, "I think I'm starting to fancy Malfoy."

"What?" Hermione almost fell out of bed. "How? Why? Are you sure?"

Ginny blushed as red as her hair. "I know, it's sort of weird," she admitted.

"Weird?" said Hermione, aware that her voice was reaching a slightly higher pitch than she had intended. "Ginny, he's -- I mean, he's not - well, he's not very nice, is he?"

"I know, I know. He's unpleasant, cruel, sarcastic, bitter and kind of strange. But I really think I like him."

"Oh," said Hermione faintly. "Are you sure it isn't just the leather outfit?" she added hopefully.

"No, I liked him before that," said Ginny, and told Hermione about how she had come into his room at the Burrow when he had had a nightmare, and how he had asked her to stay there with him. "I don't know, there was just something about how he asked me to stay. It was the first time I ever felt...sympathy for him."

"Oh," Hermione said again. She was aware that she was battling a strong urge to scream. "Well," she said, slowly, "Do you - do you think he fancies you?"

Ginny bit her lip. "I really don't know," she said. "Sometimes I think he might. He's certainly willing to talk to me, which for him is saying something. But then, yesterday -" And she repeated to Hermione

what Draco had said about not needing love or wanting to be fixed, especially not by her. "So that was a bit discouraging."

Hermione could feel her stomach knotting in anxiety. Stop that, she told herself furiously. It's none of your business. "Actually, it's not discouraging," she said, a bit squeakily. "It means he likes you enough not to want you to have unrealistic expectations of him. You have to understand - he won't lie. Not about how he feels. He's always," she choked a little on the words, "painfully honest."

"With emphasis on the 'painful' bit," said Ginny, with a laugh.

"Ginny...are you sure? I'm mean, he's awfully...difficult," said Hermione, haltingly.

"I'm sure," said Ginny, sleepily. "I mean, I can say this now, since I don't feel that way any more...but after all those years of having a crush on Harry - I'm sorry, Hermione, but I mean, you already knew that - it's just such a relief to have these feelings about somebody else for a change. Somebody who doesn't already have," and now Ginny yawned hugely, "a girlfriend..."

"Right," said Hermione, staring wide-eyed at the roof of the tent. She sat up, suddenly, feeling her heart pounding hard against her ribcage, and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Ginny blinked at her sleepily. "You getting up?"

"I forgot," said Hermione hastily. "I meant to send an owl - I'll be right back."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No - no, it's fine."

Ginny didn't respond. She's asleep, thought Hermione, with relief. Good. She got to her feet and tiptoed across the room to the chair where she had left her clothes neatly folded. She took off Charlie's t-shirt and changed into the red dress she'd been wearing for the past few days. She didn't bother looking for her shoes, but went barefoot

to the door and slipped through it, closing it carefully behind her.

It was cool outside, but not cold; the air was so clear it seemed transparent. The camp was bathed in milky moonlight; she could see the dim outline of Charlie's tent, and beyond that, the jagged line of trees in the distance.

Charlie had pointed out the where the owls were kept earlier when he had walked her to her tent. She found the small round tent without much trouble, located a diminutive brown owl, and gave it the letter she had written, addressed to Sirius Black at Malfoy Manor. She walked outside, watching the owl as it flew off over the distant line of trees, a small white speck vanishing into darkness.

And then, as she gazed unhappily out at the dark forest, a flash of silver caught her eye.

She walked towards it, not really thinking about what she was doing or why she was doing it, because she knew she had no good reason for being out here. She threaded her way among the silent, shadowed tents, passed Charlie's tent where Harry was sleeping, passed the pen where the dragons waited, awake, their gold eyes glittering like miniature suns against the dark sky. It might, under other circumstances, have struck her as an eerie and frightening sight, but she barely saw them now. She was going somewhere, she had a purpose, she was looking for --

Draco. He was standing in the same clearing that Ginny had found him in earlier, although Hermione couldn't have known that. He had taken off his jacket and was standing with his back to the rock. He seemed to be engaged in hurling Slytherin's sword violently at the trunk of a tree, watching it stick, retrieving it, and repeating the process. He didn't look up as Hermione walked into the clearing, but she saw his shoulders stiffen and knew that he had heard her approach.

"Who's there?" he called, not turning around. "You again, Weasley? Come back for another spot of name-calling? God, I come here to be alone and it's like a bloody rock concert."

"You've been fighting with Ron?" Hermione asked. "Why?"

Draco whirled around, a look of surprise flashing across his face as he saw her. "Oh," he said. "You." He glanced at the sword, sticking at right angles out of the tree trunk, and sighed. "Yes, I've been fighting with Ron," he said. "What's new? The Weasleys and the Malfoys have been mortal enemies ever since 1325 when a Malfoy caught a Weasley poaching on his land and snicked off his head with an axe. Sensitive lot, those Weasleys. Ever since then, it's been schoolyard shoving, full-time name-calling, and general loathing all around."

"Charlie doesn't loathe you," said Hermione. "And Ginny certainly doesn't loathe you."

Draco gave her a narrow look. "Did she tell you that?"

Hermione looked at the ground. "She might have said something."

Draco gave her an even narrower look. "You're jealous," he said.

Hermione jerked her head up and stared at him. "I'm not!"

"Oh, yes you are," he said shortly. "Which is pretty hilarious, considering. What are you competing for here, Hermione? Grand Prize Winner in the Bitter Irony Sweepstakes?"

"I am not jealous," repeated Hermione furiously.

He backed up a few steps and leaned back against the side of the rock, crossing his arms over his chest. "Then why are you here?"

Hermione opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then she said, rather weakly, "I was worried about you. Ginny told me you've been having nightmares."

"So you got up to check on me?"

"She told me about the blood," Hermione went on. "You know, discorporeal bleeding -- that could mean a lot of things -- Dark

magic, possession --"

He looked at her, and she felt her knees weaken -- the way they did when Harry looked at her -- only this was different, more purely physical and somehow outside herself. It's not real, she told herself angrily.

"So you go up to check on whether or not I'm possessed? That seems singularly unnecessary."

"Why are you so angry?" she demanded.

He looked exasperated. "Why am I angry? Because all day I've been having to pretend that nothing at all is wrong. Which, frankly, I'm used to. But this is getting to be a bit much. I've been concentrating so hard on not looking at you that I think if I concentrate any harder on it, I'll start bleeding out of my ears."

"Well, I'm grateful," she said stiffly.

"Ah," he replied. "Gratitude. The emotion teenage dreams are made of."

"What do you want me to do?" she said angrily.

"What do I want you to do? Well, how about - and I am starting to wonder here if you slipped some drugs into my food, but never mind-how about being honest with Harry?"

"I told you why not--"

"Right," he interrupted. "Go to bed, Hermione. You shouldn't be here."

"No," she said, obstinately.

He blinked at her. "Well, either go away or come over here," he said. "I'm not going to yell across the clearing at you."

Rather stiffly, she crossed the space that separated them and leaned

against the rock next to him. This is a bad idea, said a little voice in her head.

She ignored it.

"I wanted to ask you a question," she said.

"And I, of course, have nothing better to do than answer it."

"Why do you love me?"

He goggled at her. "What?"

"Why do you love me? I want to know."

For a moment, he was lost for words, a rare circumstance for Draco. "I don't know, Hermione," he said finally. "That's like asking me why I'm left-handed. Some things don't have a reason."

She bit her lip. "You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

She looked at him sideways. The silver moonlight fell on his upturned face, his hair, turned his eyes to silver, the shadows under them to black. He was frowning as he said, "Why did you ask me that?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"I do," he said. He turned towards her, resting his right arm against the rock, and put his hand under her chin as he had done before, tilting her head up, forcing her to look at him. "You wanted to hear me say that I love you."

"I just wanted to know why--"

"Well, I do love you," he said. "Now, go back to bed."

She didn't move.

"No so easy, is it?" he said, with bitter triumph. "I told you it

wouldn't be easy."

It was a little like being in a dream, Hermione thought. Over and over she imagined herself pulling away, walking away from him and from the clearing filled with silver moonlight, walking back to the tent -- and then reality would snap back in, and she would still be standing here, leaning against the rock with her hands behind her back, because if they weren't behind her back --

"I have to go," she said.

"So go," he said.

She heard her own voice, as if from a very great distance away, heard herself say, "How can you just let me go?"

He looked at her. And thought: this isn't real, but it seemed a distant and unimportant sort of thought, not as immediate as the feel of her skin, not as real as the sound of her voice. He had a great deal of self-control, more than most sixteen-year-old boys, more than most people twice his age. But everyone has a breaking point.

Everyone.

"I can't," he said, and kissed her.

He caught her by the shoulders and turned her towards him, bringing his mouth down on hers -- gently at first, but when she didn't pull away the trembling tension in his body altered swiftly and he pulled her towards him. A profound and solemn quietness came over her as if she had walked into a church, or some great and open space full of light. There was nothing wrong with this. There could be nothing wrong with something that felt so perfectly right, that felt like coming up into air after a long time drowning.

They stumbled backwards, locked together; Hermione felt behind herself for the rock to lean against but missed, and they crumpled together, half-falling, landing on the ground with enough force to knock the air out of Hermione's lungs.



But she didn't care. She felt the weight of him all along her body, pressing her into the ground. Felt herself being crushed, and it hurt, and the rocks digging into her back hurt, and his grip on her shoulders was so tight that it hurt, but she hardly felt the pain. She only felt the galvanic shocks that tore through her nerves as he touched her, fueled by the magic of the potion and the relief of no longer fighting what couldn't be fought. It was almost the same dizzying high that she had felt under the Imperius Curse, only that had been a cold sort of joy and this... burned. The pain and the intensity built like a storm in her head; she heard a roaring in her ears, the rush of the blood in her body, felt herself burned, crushed, annihilated, and she wanted it, wanted to disappear entirely into this sensation and forget everything else in the world except for Draco.

She heard his voice in her ear, or maybe it was in her head. Breathy, a little panicked, but shaking with a wild sort of joy. "Am I hurting you? Hermione, am I --?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Don't stop."



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Neither Draco nor Hermione heard the rustle of leaves parting as Ginny turned on her heel and fled the clearing as fast as she could. She had been worried about Hermione...the other girl had been gone so long, surely it couldn't take so long to write a letter. Perhaps she'd gotten lost. All the tents did look rather similar, especially in the dark. So Ginny had gotten up, and reached for her cloak, and gone looking.

She paused now to catch her breath, leaning against a tree trunk, half-blinded by tears. God *damn* Hermione, who did she always get everything, did she have to take everything Ginny had ever wanted? It wasn't fair. It wasn't...

She raised her head slowly, blinking tears from her eyes, and realized where she was. She was standing in front of Harry's tent. Somewhere inside that tent he was sleeping. She had watched him sleep before, back at the Burrow; he slept like a child, innocent, curled around his pillow, cheeks flushed to roses. It would be so easy to go in there and wake him up and tell him, and together they could storm the clearing in righteous indignation. They would make Draco and Hermione sorry. They would humiliate them.

It would be so easy...

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Draco had been kissed before, but not like this; he had kissed her before, but not like this. Before, her feelings had never matched his, it had always been him kissing her. Even during their last kiss, under the tree by the lake at school, he had sensed her reluctance, her desire to return to the castle and to Harry. But now, her emotion matched his, all his desire, hope, ardor and confusion mirrored in her own; it was her arm that hooked around his neck, drawing him down to kiss her, her bare feet that locked themselves around the backs of his knees. She slid her hands inside his shirt and he felt her small, cold, delicate fingers against his skin. His heart was trying to bang its way out of his ribcage and he couldn't get enough air, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was her, her whispers against his mouth, his hands tangled in her hair; she was saying his name over and over, a feverish and desperate whisper and she *wanted* him, and more than that. She loved him. He could feel it in the way she had looked at him, and even more in the shuddering tension of her grip on his arms. She loved him.

And then a sharp, unwelcome voice in the back of his mind spoke. *You shouldn't be doing this. It's not right.*

Draco was outraged. *Not right?*

*You should stop.*

*I'm not going to stop. It's a miracle, that's what this is, one chance in a thousand, and you want me to just give it up?*

The small, cold voice in his head sounded smug now. *It's what Harry would do.*

*I'm not Harry! I don't want to be Harry!*

For a moment, the cold voice was silenced, and he tightened his arms around Hermione. He kissed her mouth, kissed her eyes, kissed her throat and the fluttering pulse there. He could actually hear her heart beating, he had never really been close enough to her before to hear it like that. Had never been close enough to anyone to hear it like that.

The voice spoke again, and now it was very, very cold. *When they take the spell off her, she'll hate you for this. She'll hate you forever.*

He froze. Hermione looked up at him, brushing hair out of her dazed eyes. "Draco, is everything all right?"

"No," he said, and rolled off her, landing on his back in the grass. "We can't be doing this."

He heard her sharp intake of breath. "What? Why?"

"You know why," he said, staring fixedly up at the sky. He had a feeling that if he turned and looked at her, even once, his conviction would dissolve like so much smoke. "It's not real," he said leadenly. "This isn't you."

She reached out. He felt her cool hand against his face. "I love you," she said.

He closed his eyes. "No," he said. "No, you don't."

"It hurts," she whispered.

"I know," he said, with a spark of anger, "You think I don't know? The difference between what you feel and what I feel--"

"Is what?"

"Is that you can tell yourself that what you're feeling isn't real, and you can get rid of it with a spell. And I can't. Now get out of here, Hermione. I mean it. Get the hell out of here."

He heard her sharp intake of breath, heard her getting to her feet. "You're right," she said, in a muffled voice. "I'm sorry--"

"Don't apologize," he said. "Just leave."

She didn't say anything at all after that. He turned over and buried his face in his arms, listening through the ground to the echo of her footfalls as she walked away, growing fainter and fainter and finally fading altogether into silence.

\*\*\*

Lupin took his glasses off and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. He felt half-blind with exhaustion, but at the same time utterly unable to sleep. Brilliant moonlight poured in through the windows, tinted pale green and pale blue by the stained glass, throwing moving blocks of color over his hands as he turned the pages of book after book.

He was sitting behind the desk in what had once been Lucius Malfoy's library, engaged in what seemed more and more like a fruitless search for some way of translating the centaur's book. Guides to dead languages lay strewn across the desk and floor, but

not one of them had yielded up any kind of Rosetta Stone that might allow him to make sense of the meaningless squiggles.

It was a cramp in his shoulder than finally prompted him to move. He stood up, stretching his arms out, and as he did, he knocked the centaur's book to the floor. Sighing, he reached down to pick it up. As he lifted it, it fell open to the last page of text. Only it wasn't just text. There was an illustration there as well.

Lupin sat down rather suddenly, staring at the open book in utter disbelief.

He had no idea how long he might have sat there, staring. His spellbound astonishment was finally interrupted by the sound of the library door swinging open.

It was Sirius, in black silk pajamas, blinking sleepily. "Moony, what the hell are you doing up?" he said, without preamble. "It's the middle of the night."

Lupin didn't reply. He was still staring, astonished, down at the book in front of him.

"I know you're a night creature," added Sirius, with a tired grin. "But you should really get some sleep."

Lupin cleared his throat, trying to force his voice to function. "You're awake," he pointed out.

"Because I got an owl," said Sirius. "Landed on my head. Woke me up."

"From Harry?"

"No. Hermione Granger," said Sirius. "It's quite a letter." He held it up for Lupin to see. "Five sheets of parchment."

"What did she have to say?" asked Lupin, who had an odd sort of feeling that he already knew.

"What didn't she have to say?" said Sirius. "She wanted to tell me what happened. She says that she was kidnapped by a wizard claiming to be Salazar Slytherin. Wormtail was working for him. He dragged her off to some ruin in the forest and Harry and Draco found her there."

"A wizard claiming to be Slytherin?" echoed Lupin, eyebrows raised.

"Well, anyone can go around claiming to be Slytherin," said Sirius defensively. "You'd be surprised. I can't tell you, back when I was an Auror, how many puny-looking vampires I dispatched who went around calling themselves Dracula and Lestat."

"More to the point," said Lupin, "What did this wizard want with Hermione?"

"That's where it gets interesting," said Sirius. "Apparently he elaborated on this very baroque mythology, involving Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor, several demons-

"She's telling the truth, Sirius," said Lupin, shortly.

"Well, of course she is. Hermione wouldn't lie. I'm just saying that grown men who kidnap teenage girls and drag them off to forest hideaways usually have one thing on their minds. Maybe he thought telling her that he was Salazar Slytherin would impress her."

"And maybe he really was Salazar Slytherin," said Lupin. "The prophecy said he would come back. The centaurs say he's back. One by one, the creatures he brought into existence - the dementors, the veelas, the vampires - are vanishing. And we know that Peter - that Wormtail always flees to the shadow of the most powerful wizard. And what other wizard could be more powerful than Voldemort?"

Sirius looked dubious.

"Why on earth is she telling you all this, Sirius?" Lupin added.

Sirius looked more dubious. "I'm not exactly sure," he said. "She seems to be convinced that Slytherin has some kind of connection to

\_"

"To Draco?" said Lupin.

"Yes," said Sirius. "She's convinced he's in some kind of danger, but she doesn't want me to tell him that she thinks so. She says that when they confronted Slytherin, Draco greeted him like..like he knew who he was."

"Maybe he did know," said Lupin. "He is a descendent of Slytherin, isn't he? And I told you about that prophecy, that Slytherin will rise and with the help of his descendent, will wreak havoc and terror on the wizarding world?"

"You can't tell me you think Draco's going to go around wreaking havoc and terror on the wizarding world," said Sirius doubtfully. "He's only sixteen."

"I didn't say that," said Lupin. "But things are beginning to fall into place."

Sirius looked at him dubiously. "Please tell me that place is somewhere near this place," he said. "Because I am not following you."

Lupin looked back at the book he was holding and said, "Sirius, have you ever seen a picture of the Founding Four?"

"Well, I've seen portraits, statues and the like."

"But never a portrait of them when they were young."

Sirius stared at him. "What are you getting at?"

"Come here," said Lupin, and beckoned him over. Sirius got to his feet and came around behind Lupin's chair. He followed his friend's gaze down to the desk, where the book the centaurs had given him lay open to its last page. Half the page was taken up with more unreadable squiggles. The lower half of the page was an illustration. Yellowed with age, the parchment looked so ancient that it surely



would have fallen apart if it had not been held together by spells. But it was, and the illustration, done with bold strokes of ink, stood out plain and clear. It was a group portrait of four people. "That's Helga Hufflepuff, Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin," Lupin said.

Sirius stared. Whoever the unknown artist of the portrait had been, they had captured not just the appearance but the spirit of all four. Salazar stood with his chin raised, looking arrogant; Rowena looked thoughtful, Helga ebullient, and Godric faced the observer with a direct and challenging gaze. He knew why Lupin had showed him this. There was, in all their faces, a definite resemblance to four children that he knew. It wasn't physically obvious, but it was there, in their eyes, the way they held themselves, the way they stood.

"What does it mean?" said Sirius.

"You know what?" said Lupin. "I've absolutely no idea."

\*\*\*

When Hermione returned to the tent and sat down on the bed, she found that she was shaking with reaction, almost as if she'd just had some sort of terrible scare. She could still feel the potion coursing through her body like poison, knotting her stomach with confusion and anxiety. She leaned forward and put her face in her hands.

"Hermione?" said Ginny's voice.

Hermione whipped her hands away from her face and sat up. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"No," said Ginny. "I was awake. In fact, I was worried about you, so I went looking for you."

There was a short silence.

Hermione said, "Well, I'm fine."

"Yes," said Ginny. "I rather think you are."

It was as if a fist had squeezed her heart. She knows. "Ginny-"

"If you tell me," said Ginny, in a very cold voice, "that that wasn't what it looked like, I will kill you."

Hermione bit back the words that sprang to her lips, and whispered instead, "I wish I could explain."

"I don't want an explanation," said Ginny. "I want to forget I ever saw anything."

"I'm sorry," said Hermione, in a whisper.

"It's not me you should apologize to," said Ginny. "It's Harry. I almost told him, you know. I stood outside his tent, wondering if I should tell him."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut. "Oh, God."

"But I didn't," Ginny said finally. Her tone was tense and distant.

Relief flooded through Hermione, but it was short-lived.

"I decided you should be the one to tell him, Hermione," Ginny snapped. "And you'd better. I'll make sure that you do."

"I can't," said Hermione. "You don't understand."

"Shut up. I don't want to talk to you. Now, or ever again."

\*\*\*

In the morning, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny met in front of Charlie's tent with their broomsticks. They were a glum and silent group, Ron looking sulky, and Ginny and Hermione avoiding each other's gaze. Harry glanced around worriedly.

"Where's Malfoy? He must have gotten up before we did, because he wasn't in the tent this morning. He knows we're supposed to leave

now."

Ginny glanced at Hermione, who was looking white and ill, and staring off fixedly in the other direction.

"I dunno," said Ron, sourly. "I vote we leave him here and he can catch up later."

"We can't find the Manor without him," said Harry crossly. "It's unplottable."

Ginny sighed. "I think I know where he is," she said, dropping her broomstick on the ground. They all glanced at her, Ron with a question in his eyes, Harry with curiosity, and Hermione with an anguished sort of pleading look, which Ginny ignored. "I'll go get him," she said. "I'll be right back."

She was conscious of Ron's eyes following her as she walked away, and felt bitterly resentful. He's got no call to be so suspicious of me, she thought. If he only knew-

She emerged into the clearing where she had seen Draco and Hermione the night before. She saw the sword first, its green jewels glittering in the morning light, stuck blade-first into an oak tree. Then she looked down and saw Draco, curled up on the ground, his head on his arms, apparently asleep. She approached him slowly. He had taken off his jacket and used it as a pillow; his hair looked very white against the black material. His eyes were closed; she could see dark blue shadows under them, as if he were exhausted. He looked pathetic, and altogether rather endearing.

"Right," said Ginny, drew her foot back, and kicked him hard in the ribs.

He yelled and rolled over, clutching at his midsection. "Ouch!" he gasped, looking up at her. "Ginny! What did you that for...?"

"Get up," she said savagely. "We're all waiting for you."

He blinked at her, and sat up, leaning back on his hands.

"Oh, for God's sake," she said, glaring at him.

"What?" he said, still blinking tiredly.

"You have bite marks all over your neck," she said, in a wintry tone. "What were you two doing last night, chewing on each other? Never mind, don't answer that."

Draco put his hand to his neck, quickly. "Would you believe me if I said I was attacked by an angry squirrel?" he asked.

"Would that be the same squirrel that ate the buttons off your shirt?" replied Ginny acidly.

Draco glanced down at himself. "Bloody hell," he said. He looked up at Ginny. "Does everybody know - about last night?"

"Nobody knows but me," said Ginny, with loathing. "And I wish I didn't. I'm not going to tell Harry," she added, forestalling his question. "Not for your benefit, but because he deserves better friends than you."

Draco didn't say anything, just stood up and brushed the dirt off his clothes. Then, as Ginny watched, he ran his left hand down the front of his shirt. When he took it away, a neat row of buttons held the front together. He looked at her.

"You know some medical magic," he said. "Don't you?"

"Yes," said Ginny, knowing what was coming.

"You can fix my neck," he said. "Will you?"

Ginny felt her teeth grinding together in rage. "Malfoy-

"I can't do it myself," he said, still looking at her steadily.

Ginny closed her hand around the wand in her pocket, took a deep breath, and said. "All right. Stand still." He obeyed her as she

approached him and reached up to pull the collar of his shirt aside. She bent his head to the side, took her wand and ran it over his neck, and the marks on his skin vanished. She stepped back and surveyed her work.

"You look fine," she said.

"Thanks," he said, reaching down to pick up his sword from the ground. He straightened up to find her looking at him, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Just so you know, I'm not doing this for you," she said. "I'm doing this because I don't want to see Harry hurt."

"Really?" Draco looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite read - anger? Amusement? Guilt? Nothing at all? "Better keep your eyes shut, then," he said, and walked away from her, back towards where the others were waiting with their broomsticks.

\*\*\*

Sirius' attempt to be stern and disciplinary was summarily ruined by the fact that when Draco, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny walked into the anteroom at Malfoy Manor, holding their broomsticks and looking wary, Sirius burst out laughing. "Draco!" he exclaimed. "What are you *wearing*?"

Draco looked down blankly, then back up again. "Charlie's clothes," he said.

"Ha!" said Sirius, or something very like it, and proceeded to fall about laughing.

"I think he looks sweet," said Narcissa, who had been standing beside Sirius on the stairs with her arms folded. Unable to suppress a smile, she uncrossed them, walked down the stairs, threw her arms around Draco, and kissed him on the forehead.

"Mum!" he exclaimed, looking only marginally less horrified than he had when confronted with Salazar Slytherin.

"Those trousers can't be comfortable," she said. "'They're so..."

"They're fine," he said, through his teeth.

Meanwhile, Harry was looking at Sirius in astonishment. He had rarely seen Sirius laugh so hard. Sirius caught his glance, and saw the surprise in it and the anxiety as well. He stopped laughing, came down the stairs, and stood looking at Harry for a moment, noting with a pang that Harry was now nearly as tall as he was.

"Hallo, Sirius," said Harry, looking nervous.

Sirius stood still, looking at his godson, seeing Harry's green eyes widen with anxiety behind his glasses. Then he leaned forward, and as Narcissa had done with her son, kissed Harry on the forehead. "Welcome home, Harry," he said.

\*\*\*

It took several hours of everyone talking over everyone else in loud, excitable voices for Sirius and Lupin to even begin to sort out the story of what had been going on.

They were all in the library (except for Narcissa, who had remained downstairs to talk to the Aurors who had come to pick up the last of Lucius' Dark Arts collection.) It was early afternoon now, and the stained-glass windows threw dizzying patches of colored light over everyone as Hermione, the last and the most reluctant to speak, told them what she could remember of what had happened to her. Lupin stood with his hands clenched on the side of the desk while Sirius listened with his eyes narrowed and his fingers templed under his chin.

When Hermione had finished, Sirius lowered his hands to the desk and shook his head. "Well," he said. "You've all been through quite a bit. And you've all," he added, "been very brave, if somewhat over-impetuous. But I think you also know that this - situation - reaches far beyond you. It's very, very serious."

Hermione closed her eyes. A terrible pounding headache had begun just behind her forehead. Vaguely, she heard Sirius say,

"The real issue of course, is whether that actually was Salazar Slytherin, and if so-

"Of course he was Slytherin," said Draco, in a tight voice. "Who else would he have been?"

"That is the question," said Sirius. "We can't discount that this could be some plan of Voldemort's. He might think that the name of Slytherin would strike such fear into the-

"That wasn't Voldemort," interrupted Draco, again. "Voldemort would have killed us if he'd had us right there like that. He wouldn't have let us go."

"The Dark Lord wouldn't have wanted you," put in Ron, rather unexpectedly. "He would have wanted Harry. Maybe that's why he let you go. If he'd kidnapped Hermione, he would have expected Harry to show up. Not," he added, with distaste, "you."

"Right," said Hermione, irritably. "Because Voldemort reads Witch Weekly and knows all about my love life."

"Besides, I've met Voldemort," added Draco, in a rather tense voice. "And that wasn't him."

"Sometimes," said Ron, leaning forward and looking at Draco with mock earnestness, "you know, villains, they actually disguise themselves. In fact, they're known for it."

"It was Salazar Slytherin!" shouted Draco with sudden and unexpected violence. "Doubt all you like, he will make you regret it-"

He broke off.

Everyone was staring at him.

Harry was the first to break the silence. "Malfoy," he said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm fine," said Draco, although he looked startled.

"Are you sure?" said Sirius, looking at him with concern.

"You'd better tell them, Sirius," said Lupin, suddenly. He had been very quiet up until that point and was looking uneasy.

Sirius glanced over at Lupin, and then back at Harry and the rest. "Tomorrow, Professor Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge are coming here to talk to you," he said, to all of them. "As I said before, this is a serious situation. Perhaps we can leave further speculation until then-

"I'm sorry," said Hermione suddenly, and stood up. "I'm not feeling well." She was aware of Harry glancing up at her, and of the room swinging around her in a coruscating blur of colors, but mostly she was aware of the pain in her head. It felt like two hot red pokers were pressed against the backs of her eyeballs. "It's my head."

She was vaguely aware of a murmur of voices, and of Harry's voice in particular. She heard herself tell him that she was fine, just tired. She heard Lupin say something in a worried tone about shock and stress, and she heard Sirius say that she should lie down. Then she was aware of a hand on her arm, and that the hand seemed to be attached to Draco. "I'll show her where one of the bedrooms is," he said. She thought about protesting, but her head hurt too much. She heard Harry push his chair back, and then heard Sirius say, "Harry, wait just a minute," and was, guiltily, briefly thankful that Harry couldn't follow her.

Draco turned her towards the door. Her vision cleared a little as they crossed the room. As they passed by Lupin, she saw him recoil sharply back from Draco. She blinked in surprise, glancing back over her shoulder. Now why would he do that? she wondered, as the library door closed behind them.

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"Harry, would you not fidget for just one second?" said Sirius exasperated.

Harry made a concerted effort to sit still. He was worried about Hermione, she had looked extremely pale and ill just now. And, of course, sending her off with Malfoy to look at bedrooms didn't sit too well with him either.

Sirius looked at Ron and Ginny. "I owled your parents this morning," he said.

Ron and Ginny let out identical wails of horror. "Sirius!" said Ron, looking betrayed. "How could you?"

Despite himself, Harry felt a small smile creep across his mouth. Ron wasn't used to the new, more parental Sirius; he was used to a Sirius on the run from authorities, a Sirius who lived in a cave, ate rats, and never, ever, owled anyone's parents.

"Well, I haven't heard back yet," said Sirius.

"Maybe the owl got lost," said Ron, hopefully. "Maybe it couldn't find them on holiday."

"Ron, owl post doesn't go missing," said Ginny, irritably.

"But, in the meantime, you can dream," pointed out Sirius.

"And we might as well tell you, Harry," said Lupin, walking over to the desk and looked at Harry with his arms crossed, "that you've been expelled from Magid school."

Harry made a sort of choking noise. "Expelled?"

"Well," Lupin pointed out gently, "you did break about thirty school rules, run away while classes were in session, and destroy school property."

"Expelled," Harry repeated, looking horrified. Then he glanced up at

Lupin, and asked, "Is Malfoy expelled, too?"

"Er, yes," said Lupin, blinking in surprise.

"Good," said Harry, with immense satisfaction.

"Really, Harry, is that all you care about?" said Sirius, looking amused.

"Well," said Harry. "Actually. Yeah."

Sirius looked at him and said, "Harry. If you really hate him, you don't have to live here with him, you know."

There was a short, acute silence. Ron and Ginny glanced away, as did Lupin. And Harry looked merely astonished. Finally he said, in a startled sort of voice, "I don't hate him." He looked around, a bit defensively, and shrugged. "I don't."

Sirius looked over at Lupin, unable to conceal a slightly triumphant smile. Ron looked dubious. And Ginny suddenly bolted to her feet, announced in a strangled sort of voice that she wanted to check on Hermione, and left the room.

\*\*\*

As soon as the library door shut behind them, Hermione wrenched her arm out of Draco's grasp and glared at him.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Taking you to your room," he said, and started to walk down the corridor.

She followed him, scowling. "You know we shouldn't be alone together."

"Correction. You shouldn't be alone with me. I can control myself perfectly well around you."

"Oh, so that was just me last night," she began waspishly, realized how she sounded, and stopped. "Never mind. It's not your fault, I know you didn't choose this."

"Just what Freud would have said, only possibly without that know-it-all attitude."

Hermione was relieved to note that the love potion did not prevent her from becoming very, very angry. "What is your problem?" she snapped. "As if we don't have enough to deal with."

"We?" he echoed, and stopped dead, glaring at her. "This is not my problem. This is your problem. These are your friends. These are your lies. You," he said, and now his voice snapped with anger, "have to realize, Hermione, that there are repercussions. There are consequences to your actions. There are--"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

He threw his hands up in exasperation. "Forget it," he said. "I'm leaving, anyway."

"Leaving?"

"Leaving," he said, and started to back down the corridor, away from her. "I've got an errand to do."

She stared at him. "You can't just go," she protested. "Sirius--"

Draco shrugged. "So cover for me."

"What?"

"Cover for me. I've been covering for you since yesterday. Now you cover for me. I'll be back later, maybe tonight. Just.. stall them if they ask for me."

"Where am I supposed to tell them you've gone?"

"You're clever," said Draco. "You'll think of something."

He turned and began to walk away from her, down the corridor.

"I won't make up lies for you!" she called after him, her voice cracking a little.

He glanced back at her over his shoulder, and shrugged. "Really?" he said, with immense disdain. "And here I thought you loved me."

Knotting her hands into fists of rage, she watched him go without another word. Then she turned around, and realized, to her horror, that she was completely lost. She stared around her. She was in a hallway lined with portraits, much like the other dozens of hallways in the Manor. And she had been so preoccupied by her argument with Draco that she had no recollection whether she had come from the left, or the right. With a mental shrug of despair, she turned right and walked down a narrow corridor, trying to remember if any of the portraits looked familiar. It was hard to tell - portrait after portrait of pale, blond, arrogant-looking Malfoys stared back at her. And they all, she thought hopelessly, looked rather the same.

She turned one corner, and then another, and came out into a hallway she was positive she had never seen before. And there, standing in the middle of the hallway, was Ginny.

Ginny glanced up and saw her, and her eyes darkened. She started to turn around to walk away, but Hermione, who was starting to feel as if everyone had begun to hate her, caught at her hand. "Ginny, don't."

"Leave it alone, Hermione. I don't want to talk to you."

"You don't understand. It really wasn't what it looked like."

Now Ginny looked anxious. "This is really isn't the time to-"

"Well, when is the time?" Hermione snapped, her voice rising. The pain in her head made her own voice sound shrill in her ears. "I have to explain to you, otherwise I'll be panicking all the time that you'll tell Harry. And you can't tell Harry, you have to promise me-"

"Hermione, no," Ginny interrupted, shaking her head at Hermione, but Hermione ignored her.

"Ginny, I promise you, I swear that this is important. I've never lied to him before, do you think I would lie to him about just anything?"

"Hermione! Shut *up*!" Ginny exploded, but it was too late. The door she had been standing in front of opened, and with a shock that felt like the bottom of her stomach had fallen out, Hermione saw Ron standing there, staring at both of them with astonishment. Behind him she could see the familiar room, the desk, the rows of books, the glass windows -- somehow she had come in a full circle and wound up back at the library. And it was quite evident from the expression on Ron's face that Lucius' library did not have soundproofing. "What," said Ron, looking from Hermione to his sister, "are you two yelling about?"

"I," said Ginny tightly, "was not yelling."

Hermione cleared her throat. She was beginning to feel something she had never felt before in her life.

Stupid.

"It's nothing," she said.

"The hell it's nothing," said Ron, and broke off as another hand took hold of the door he was holding and swung it wide.

Harry.

She could vaguely see the shapes of Lupin and Sirius behind him, couldn't make out their expressions, and didn't really care. She was looking at Harry, and seeing not just Harry when she did, but the wreck of the fragile structure she had been trying so hard to preserve.

*This can't be happening.*

"You're lying to me?" Harry said, looking at her with surprise and a dawning sort of dismay. "Lying to me about what?"

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"Are you sure about this?" asked the wizard guard, looking anxiously at the boy in front of him. His face was familiar to him from pictures in the Daily Prophet, and of course the resemblance was there, as well. But the pictures hadn't shown such a cold, set expression. Nor had it shown the fear in the boy's eyes. "If you don't mind my saying, you don't look all that well..."

"I'm perfectly fine," said the boy, in the ringingly superior tones of someone used to getting his own way. Although he was wrapped in a floor-length black travelling cloak, and it was not a cold day, his teeth were chattering. "I'm authorized, is that correct?"

"Well, of course you are, but-"

"And you'll be watching?"

"Yes."

"Then let me in."

"All right," said the guard, and took out his wand. The lock on the heavy iron door was less a lock than a series of magical wards that required a sequence of spells to remove. The process took several moments, during which the boy stood glaring at him, pale and impatient-looking.

"Are you done yet?" he demanded.

"Yes," said the guard, and pushed the door open. The boy went through without looking at him, and the door shut behind him. As it did, it became transparent, so that the guard could watch what transpired in the room, although its occupants could not see out.

It took Draco's eyes several moments to adjust to the half-light inside the cell. There were no windows, nor were there any lamps. The light that there was seemed to come from the walls, dimly blue and phosphorescent. By its glow, he made out the shape of the small, square room, a mattress on the floor, and a low table set against a wall. A man sat at the table, holding a book in his lap. He had raised his head when the door opened, and his eyes fell on Draco with a cold and calculating look altogether lacking in surprise.

"I knew you'd come eventually," he said.

Draco felt his hands knot together tightly under his cloak.

"Hello, Father," he said.

References:

1) "I suppose I did," said Draco, looking rather cheerful. "If, that is, you mean defeated in the sense of 'having met'." - Buffy.

2) "'I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep But I've Got An Enormous Broom'. -- Blackadder.

3) Undiscovered Country -- "Hamlet."

Draco Sinister

## Chapter Six - Fortunate Sons

\*\*\*

"Hello, Father," Draco said.

Lucius Malfoy slowly lowered the book he was holding, although he did not stand up to greet his son. He looked much the same, Draco thought. Even in prison, Lucius retained most of his sharp dignity - he looked neat and trim in starched-looking, plain gray robes.

"Draco," said his father, inclining his head.

"I didn't think they'd let me in," said Draco, in a rather constricted voice.

"I left instructions that they were to allow you in when you came," said his father. "The Malfoy name still counts for something, despite all you and your mother have done to destroy it."

"So you bribed them," said Draco. "Typical."

"I ask myself sometimes," Lucius said, "did I raise a child who is ungrateful, or merely stupid?" He tilted his head to the side, his eyes still fixed on his son. Draco saw that his thin, long-fingered hands were locked tightly together across his lap. "What do you think, Draco?"

"What were the choices again?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "I had forgotten," he said, "how amusing you find yourself. Is that why you came here? To impress me with your wit?"

"No," said Draco, in the same flat tone, "I was just hoping we could continue our great familial tradition of gut-wrenching misery and verbal abuse. Tell me: would it kill you, just this once, to say 'Hello,



son, what did you want to talk to me about?"

Lucius leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. He kicked out sharply with his left foot, catching the chair opposite him with one booted toe and sending it spinning across the room towards Draco, who had to jump back to avoid being hit by it. It fell to the floor at his feet.

"Sit," said Lucius.

Slowly, Draco reached down and yanked the chair upright. He sat down, keeping a wary eye on his father.

Anyone looking at the two of them would have been startled, first by the resemblance between them - the same sharp, refined features and pale coloring, although Lucius' eyes were black - and secondly, by the hostility that crackled between them like an electrical charge.

"So, son," said Lucius Malfoy. "What did you want to talk to me about? Did you want to ask me how I'm enjoying myself here? The congenial company, the excellent food, the kindly treatment?"

"No," said Draco. "I wanted to ask you something about our family."

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

"You told Harry there was madness in our family," said Draco. "I wanted to know - what kind of madness? How far back does it go?"

Lucius' eyes betrayed a flicker of surprise that quickly smoothed itself out into indifference. "You think you're going mad?"

"I'm not sure."

Lucius looked at his son, and for a moment saw the pale, familiar face stripped of its defenses, saw the pain and the panic behind the eyes. He thought of his wife, who had given their son her slanting silver eyes and her propensity to feel things strongly. And yet. Since his son was four years old, he hadn't cried. Not that Lucius could recall. Unnatural, his wife had said, a child that doesn't cry.

Draco stood up suddenly, and leaned his hands on the back of the chair. He looked very young. He said, "I've been having ... dreams. Not my own dreams. Somebody else's. There are battles, a lot of blood and killing. A woman. Sometimes she's Hermione, sometimes she isn't. A banner with a dragon on it-"

"Facing left," said Lucius. "A silver dragon on a black background."

Draco blinked at him. "You know whose dreams they are," he said. "Don't you?"

Lucius examined his fingernails. "They're your destiny, boy," he said in a bored tone.

"My destiny?" snapped Draco. "I haven't got a destiny. That's Harry, he's the one with the destiny."

"On the contrary. You certainly have a destiny, Draco. In fact, I might go so far as to say that it has you."

"What are you talking about?"

Lucius smiled. "Let me tell you a little something, boy. When a man joins the Death Eaters, he gives himself to the Dark Lord. And the Dark Lord in turn takes one thing from him. To be accepted into his circle, you must offer up one thing that is purely yours. It might be a specific memory, or a gift with languages, a skill at sports. It is his choice. When I joined him, he asked me for you."

Draco's face was blank with astonishment. "But I wasn't even born! You were sixteen!"

"No, you weren't born. But he knew you would be. We are among the last families with remnants of Slytherin's blood, and you... the timing was perfect. The Dark Lord showed me how to perform certain dangerous and difficult spells and enchantments to ensure that you would be born in the image he had designed. With certain qualities. Magid powers. Viciousness and charm. Lack of empathy. Competitiveness. Cruelty...you were to follow in his footsteps, and I--

"

Draco interrupted him. "What happened? Did the spells not work?"

"Oh, they worked," said Lucius. "But then the Dark Lord was defeated. You were not yet one year old. And there was no one to direct your growth, to continue the spells and the potions and the training. There was only me. And I did my best, but somehow you got away from me. You were meant for a purpose, but I don't know what that purpose is. I'm afraid I never have known it. When the Dark Lord returned to power, he refused to tell me. He said I would learn in good time." Lucius shrugged. "I suppose this is as good a time as any."

Draco had gone very white, staring at him.

"Think of it as an alarm clock," said his father, leaning back in his chair. "Whatever you carry inside you has lain dormant, until now. Until your Magid powers began to work, until you were nearly grown, until you found the sword."

"The sword?" Draco echoed.

"The sword is the key," said Lucius, blandly. "The Dark Lord gave it to me when you were born. Of course, I couldn't touch it," he added, sounding slightly bitter, "so I was never...tempted." He looked at his son. "Does it give you visions?"

"Nightmares," said Draco, in a clenched sort of voice.

"Visions," said his father, again. "You see what you want, what you need, what was and what will be."

"It doesn't show me what I want!" exclaimed Draco, revolted. "It shows me...horrible things.."

Lucius smiled. "The first time you saw it," he said, "you wanted it, didn't you? You took it from Harry, you kept it by you, and you resisted all efforts to deprive you of it. You take it wherever you go - you have it with you now. You cannot bear to be parted from it." He

looked at his son. "It's your future, boy. And you can't walk away from it."

"I can," said Draco. His hands were shaking.

"You *can't*," roared Lucius, suddenly starting up in his chair. "You were *made*, don't you understand that? You were built to fulfill a purpose. Even your name -" He broke off and subsided back into his chair. "Even your name was chosen for you by the Dark Lord. The dragon..."

Draco sat very still. Without looking at his father, he said, "And that was all right with you?"

Lucius said nothing.

Draco raised his head. "Whatever else I am, I'm your son. Of your blood. I look like you. I have our family name. And you traded me to the Dark Lord for a little bit of power?"

"It would have been a great deal of power," corrected Lucius. Then he looked away. "I never wanted a child," he said. "It was all part of the Plan."

Draco looked down at his hands where they gripped each other in his lap. "In my dreams," he said, hoarsely. "He tells me I have to kill Harry."

"Then kill Harry," said Lucius. "It's what you were meant for."

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"A *love potion*?"

Hermione heard Ron's voice as if from a long way away. She looked up tiredly. They were all staring at her - except Harry - Sirius, leaning against the bookshelves with a look of disbelief on his face, Lupin, with faint embarrassment, Ron, who looked shocked, and Ginny. Ginny looked worried. Sometime during what felt to Hermione like her interminable explanation about the love potion

and its consequences, Ginny had put her arm over the side of Hermione's chair, taken her hand, and squeezed it. Hermione continued to hold on tightly to Ginny's hand while she talked, and was grateful for the contact.

Harry was sitting down at the desk, his arms crossed over his chest, staring fixedly over everyone's heads at one of the stained-glass windows. So far, he had been entirely silent.

"I always thought love potions were a bit of a joke," Ron went on, flushed with surprise. "Not real."

"They're real," said Lupin, who was looking rather shaken. "They're illegal, of course."

Sirius was shaking his head. "It makes no sense," he said. "I was thinking that before, and now..."

Now Harry glanced over at him.

"For Slytherin to want Hermione as his Source. Only a Magid can be another Magid's Source. The drain on her would have killed her."

"Rowena was a Magid," said Hermione. "Maybe he assumed that since she was, I would be."

"An assumption that would have been the end of you," said Sirius, looking tense.

"I'd rather have died," said Hermione, in a fierce little voice. "Than be in love with that - that evil -"

"Oh, but being in love with Malfoy's all right?" interrupted Ron, shaking his head.

Now Harry spoke, and at the sound of his quiet voice, they all jumped, as if a bomb had gone off. "Let her alone, Ron," he said.

They all gaped at him, Hermione more than anyone else. She tried to catch his eye to give him a grateful smile, but he wouldn't look at

her. He was looking at Sirius, and his hands were clenched tightly in his lap. "Is there a way of taking it off?" he said. "Is there a reversal spell?"

It was Lupin who answered. "I'm sure there must be one, Harry," he said, although he sounded far from sure.

"Every spell has a reversal," said Hermione, slightly shrilly.

"No," said Lupin, quietly. "Not every spell."

They all stared at him.

"But most do," he added quickly. "Hermione," he reached into the desk drawer, and pulling out a quill and parchment, held it out to her, "I'm going to need you to write down everything you remember about the potion: how it looked, what it tasted like, what it feels like, anything that will help us identify it. That way we can more efficiently discover whether or not it is, in fact, reversible."

Hermione slowly drew the parchment towards her, took hold of the quill, and echoed faintly, "How it...feels?"

"Er, yes," said Lupin, and made a nebulous gesture towards the quill she was holding. "Write it down, you don't have to tell us."

Rather inadvertently, everyone looked over at Harry, who flushed and looked away again. Hermione bent her head and began to scratch away with the quill.

Lupin glanced sideways at Sirius, who glanced back. It was evident that this new information regarding Slytherin's intentions towards Hermione had given them much to think about. It was equally evident that they were far from willing to discuss it in front of Harry and Hermione. Especially Harry, who was beginning to look as if he were hanging on by the merest thread. Ginny and Ron had now transferred their worried glances to him.

The library door opened, and Narcissa came in, looking flushed and slightly worried. "Sirius --" she began, and broke off, as Harry

jumped out of his chair as if he'd been shot, stared at her blankly, and announced, "I've got to go." He hurried out of the room, brushing past Narcissa, and slamming the door behind him.

Hermione began to get to her feet, looking blindly after Harry. "I should -"

There was the sound of a muffled explosion from the corridor outside. Ron grabbed at Hermione's arm and yanked her back.

"Bollocks," said Sirius, with finality. "Magid powers. I'd nearly forgotten."

Narcissa stared at all of them with wide eyes. "What on earth is going on?"

Ron continued to hang on to Hermione's arm while Sirius, with admirable concision, explained. His speech was punctuated by occasional explosive sounds from outside the library, each one of which caused Hermione to wince.

"A love potion?" Narcissa echoed in disbelief, when he was done.

Everybody nodded.

"Right," said Narcissa, and raised her chin. In that moment, Hermione thought, she looked very much like her son - determined, defiant, even a little arrogant. "Here's what we're going to do. Ron," she said, turning to him. (Ron blushed. It was the first time Narcissa had ever spoken to him directly.) "Go after Harry. Make sure he's all right. If things start flying around, tackle him."

Ron blinked and nodded.

"Sirius," she said, turning back towards the desk. "I want you to write to Severus Snape."

Sirius' jaw dropped. "Snape?"

"No one in the world knows more about potions than he does," said

Narcissa. "The Dark Lord himself used to call on him for assistance, back when he was a Death Eater. If the potion is reversible, Severus will know about it."

Now Narcissa turned to Hermione, who was suffering Ron's grip on her arm with very bad grace. She was, in fact, glaring at him. Which was fine, since if anyone in the world could match Hermione glare for glare, it was Ron; they'd been practicing for five years.

"Hermione," she said, more gently, "I want you to come with me."

Hermione's head went up, and she said quickly, "I have to talk to Harry-"

"No," said Narcissa. "You can't."

"But -"

"The last thing he needs," said Narcissa, evenly, "is to get more angry. While he would never hurt you, if his temper gets out of control, he could become a danger to himself as well as to the breakable objects around him."

Hermione paled, but nodded.

Narcissa glanced over at Lupin. "Make Sirius write that letter. And while he's doing that, you can work on translating that book. Agreed?"

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "Yes, indeed."

Narcissa held out a hand to Hermione, who glanced down at Ron. Ron grudgingly released her, and, with Narcissa holding her arm, they left.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Ginny let out an exasperated breath. "What about me?" she said, turning to Lupin and Sirius. "Don't I get given orders too? Or am I not useful?"

Sirius put his head in his hands. "Ginny..." he said, wearily. "Not right now..."



"Oh all right," she said crankily, got to her feet and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

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As soon as Ginny had left the room, Sirius wheeled on Lupin. "Now tell me the truth," he said, looking at him hard. "Do you think that love potion is reversible?"

"I don't know," replied Lupin, who was taking down a number of books from the shelves and tossing them onto the desk.

"I saw your expression change. You know something."

Lupin picked up a book whose spine was stamped in gold lettering: *Moste Potente Potions*. "I don't know anything for sure," he said, irritably. "But what I do know is that love potions are not exactly benign magic. There's a reason they're illegal."

"Because they're really, really annoying?" asked Sirius, drawing the parchment Hermione had been writing on towards him and scanning the sparse lines she had scribbled.

"Any magic that contradicts one's essential nature is by definition dark magic," said Lupin. "Love potions are simply another variation of what goes into the Imperius Curse. An enchantment that subsumes the will of the subject..."

Sirius shook his head. "Hermione's a strong-willed girl."

"That's what I'm worried about," said Lupin, flipping morosely through *Moste Potente Potions*. "You've seen what can happen to people who fight the Imperius Curse. Madness...if they're lucky..."

"Don't," interrupted Sirius, rubbing the back of his hand across his eyes. He reached out for a piece of parchment, lifted his quill, and stared moodily.

"What?" said Lupin, looking down at the top of his head.

"Snape," said Sirius, gloomily.

"Yes, what about him?"

"Oh, come on Moony! If I write and ask him for a favor, d'you really think he'll hop right to it? He HATES me!"

"Probably on account of that one time you tormented him mercilessly for seven years straight when we were in school," said Lupin, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"Yes, he's tetchy that way," agreed Sirius. Then his eyes lit up suddenly and he smiled.

Lupin gave him a very suspicious glance. "Something just occurred to you, didn't it?"

"Well," said Sirius, a small smile still hovering around his mouth, "Snape wouldn't be jumping to do me a favor...or you a favor, admit it, he hates you too - and he'd rather have his leg eaten by a Blast-Ended Skrewt than do Harry a favor, but there is someone he does like..."

"Draco," said Lupin, and paused. "But he's not here. Hermione said he went off to be by himself."

"Can't blame him," said Sirius. "Just as I'm sure he wouldn't blame me for this," and he picked up the quill and began writing furiously.

"Are you forging a letter from Draco?" asked Lupin, with detached interest.

"Yep," said Sirius. "Hand me that Malfoy family seal, will you, it's in the third drawer..."

"That's rather dishonest," said Lupin, handing him the seal.

Sirius slammed the quill down on the table and glared at his friend. "Do you have a better idea?"

Lupin thought for a moment. "Not really."

"You saw the look on Harry's face didn't you? And Hermione - it's not fair, they're just children, they shouldn't have to-"

"Sirius," interrupted Lupin, tugging the quill out of his friend's hand. "Your-"

"Moony!" protested Sirius, in exasperation. "I am sending this letter, and nothing you can say -"

"Your hand is shaking, is what I was going to say. Give me the parchment, I know Draco's handwriting from when I had him in class. Let me do it."

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"I *can't*," said Draco.

Lucius' mouth tightened. "You're weak," he said. "That's partly my fault."

Draco didn't respond. Without seeming to be aware of it, he had backed up, away from his father, until he was standing against the wall. "What happens if I don't do anything?" he said, in a dry voice, finally. "Do I go mad?"

"What do you think?" said Lucius. He began to walk towards his son, slowly, looking thoughtful. "As you know of him, so Slytherin knows of your existence now. Either you join with him, or he will kill you."

He was standing very close to Draco now. The boy looked down, but it was too late - Lucius' hand shot out and seized his chin, forcing his head up.

"There is an intricate mechanism inside you, boy," he said. "The Dark Lord wound you up like clockwork and set you on this path. It could be a path to greatness. This could be your second chance. Our second chance. This is what you were designed for. How many men

can say they were born to a purpose? But you-"

"What if I fight it?" Draco demanded, his voice taking on a slightly wild tone. "What then?"

"What happens to a watch when you wind it backwards?" replied Lucius. "It *breaks*."

Draco sucked in a gasp as if he'd been punched in the stomach.

Lucius took no notice.

"Why would you want to fight it, anyway?" he demanded, still staring at his son. "Are you trying to be *good*?"

Lucius had his own special way of saying the word good - not as if it were an adjective, describing a good boy, or a good dog, but very definitely a noun: Good, and not a pleasant noun at that. Draco, of course, would know exactly what he meant.

"No," Draco said, quickly, and then, "I don't know." He glared at his father. "I just want to have a *choice*."

"You think you have a choice now? You don't have a choice now. You're a slave to what you think you want, like everyone else. You think I didn't see your face, back at the Mansion, when you looked at them, and at her, and her face when she looked at you both? Do you want to barter your destiny for the friendship of a boy who will never like you, and the favors of a girl who doesn't return your love? To ally yourself with people who will never regard you with anything more than suspicion and mistrust? They are not our kind of people, and they never will be. You will never belong with them."

As he spoke, Lucius watched the changing colors in his son's face - first white, then very red, then white again. He could tell Draco was struggling to hide whatever it was he was feeling, and from that alone, knew that he was hurting him. Which was as it should be. He was his son, his to help or to hurt as he saw fit.

"You can't change what you are, Draco," he said, his voice soft and

unyielding. "And they know that. Dumbledore, Sirius Black, even your new friend Harry Potter - they know that there is something they have that you don't, some essential fragment missing from your soul that makes you different. Call it morality, or whatever you like. But you can't change it. You'll never be like them. You can wear the guise of morality, but underneath it you are *what I made you to be*."

For a moment, Draco returned his father's gaze without moving. Then his eyes darkened, and he yanked his head away, breaking Lucius' grip on his chin.

"Let me go," he said.

*I've lost him*, thought Lucius, astonished, as his son, not meeting his eyes, slid away from him along the wall. *I almost had him - There was something I could have said, something that would have worked, would have broken him down. But I've lost him.*

Disappointment and rage made his voice harsh when he spoke, "I should have killed you when I had the chance."

Draco stopped moving away from his father and paused. He was still leaning against the wall, and something about the way he was leaning made Lucius wonder if the wall was the only thing keeping him upright.

He lifted his head, and looked at his father. Fear and pain and rage had made his eyes nearly black, and for that moment, they looked very much alike. "You want me dead?" said Draco. "Fine." He reached up, took hold of the Epicyclical Charm that hung around his neck, and, without a moment's hesitation, drew it over his head and threw it at his father. Reflexively, Lucius Malfoy reached up and caught the bright circular object out of the air. And stared at it.

"For you, Father," said Draco. "Go ahead. Break it. Crush it. I'll be dead before the guard can get into the room." Lucius didn't move. Just stared at his son, who stared back out of blazing eyes, and

hissed, "What are you afraid of? You're already in here for life. They'll never let you out. Go on - *do it!*"

"No," said Lucius, closing his hand gently around the charm.

Draco stared.

"I don't want you dead, boy," said Lucius, with a slight smile. "I've changed my mind. I want the satisfaction of knowing that you are alive and that you suffer. That you grow and suffer, knowing what you have done to destroy our family and how you have condemned me to rot in this Hell. I hope it eats you alive." He glared at his son. "Now get out of here. I'm sick of the sight of you."

Draco backed away. Then he turned and rapped hard on the cell door. He stood for a moment, waiting, his back to his father. Then, as he heard the wards on the other side of the door being unlocked, he turned back around, very slowly, and looked at Lucius.

"This isn't Hell, Father," he said. "When you get to Hell, I think you'll find there will be a lot more of *'our kind of people'* there."

The door opened, and Draco went through it.

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If Ron had been worrying about finding Harry, his worries were quickly dissipated as soon as he left the library. It turned out to be a simple matter of following the sounds of breakage and explosions. Ron paced nervously down the winding corridors, stopped in front of a large metal-bound oak door, through which he could now hear what sounded like glass shattering, took a deep breath, and pushed it open.

A bizarre sight met his eyes. For one bewildered moment, he thought that it was somehow, impossibly, snowing in the room. The air was full of drifting white shapes; he could see Harry standing in the center of the room, a slender dark shadow in the middle of a feathery-white tornado. And feathery was right, he realized, stepping further into the room, they were feathers - feathers from at

least a dozen pillows, which Harry had somehow managed to shred into pieces. Remnants of pillow casing lay around the room and many tiny white feathers were caught in Harry's black hair.

"*Harry*," said Ron, caught between sympathy and amazement. "What've you done?"

"What does it look like?" said Harry, crossing his arms over his chest like a mutinous five-year-old.

Ron looked around with slowly dawning suspicion. They were obviously in a bedroom - there was a black four-poster bed and a huge wardrobe shoved against a far wall. "What room are we in?" he asked.

"Malfoy's bedroom," announced Harry, with grim satisfaction.

"I thought as much," said Ron.

"I'm redecorating," announced Harry, and Ron watched in amazement as a pair of glass candlesticks sailed across the room and smashed merrily into a far wall.

"Sirius is going to *kill* you," he said, awed.

"Good," said Harry. "A quick, painless death sounds like just what the doctor ordered right about now."

"Harry," said Ron, taking advantage of the momentary break in the storm to sidle a little closer to Harry, just in case he needed to tackle him. Although that option was looking extremely unappealing, due in no large part to the enormous amount of broken glass on the floor. "It's just a spell! She doesn't have any actual feelings for Malfoy!"

Harry just looked at him.

"Okay," said Ron grudgingly. "Maybe she has some, very slight, in fact extremely teensy, kind of feelings for him. But nothing significant."

"You saw Lupin's face," said Harry, brushing feathers out of his hair. "He doesn't think there's any counterspell. I could tell."

Ron was shocked. "Of course there's a counterspell."

"No, there isn't," said Harry, sounding resigned. "She's going to spend the rest of her life in love with Malfoy...and I can either try to keep her with me and watch her wish she was with him, or just let her go off with him and they'll get married and have curly-haired blond children and I'll be "Uncle Harry" and maybe they'll even name one of their horrible offspring after me and -"

"HARRY!" Ron interrupted desperately. "You're wittering."

Bang! One of the fluffy pillows on the bed shot up into the air and exploded, showering everything with feathers.

"It's just a spell," said Ron, again, sadly brushing feathers off his shoulder. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Then why didn't she tell me?" said Harry, glaring at Ron, at the feathers, and at everything else in the room. "She could have just told me but she chose not to. Either she didn't tell me because she didn't want me to know so she could enjoy the whole being in love with Malfoy experience, or she doesn't trust me enough to think that I could handle it, which is ridiculous."

"Right," said Ron, unable to help himself, "because you're handling it SO WELL right now."

Harry's eyes narrowed.

At that moment, the door swung open.

It was Ginny. She was looking irritable, and her eyes lit immediately on Ron, and she frowned. "I am not *useless*--" she began.

"Ginny!" interrupted Ron, in horror. "I'm a little busy right now!"



"But-" Ginny looked from Ron, to Harry, to the multitude of drifting feathers and her eyes widened in shock. "I thought -" she began, uncertainly.

"Ginny, get out of here," added Ron, nervously.

But Harry was now looking at her with narrow eyes. "No," he said. "Stay, why don't you. You like me, don't you, Ginny?"

"Um," said Ginny, looking alarmed. "Sure I like you, Harry..."

"Do you want to go out with me?"

Ginny's mouth formed a small "O" of surprise. "What?"

*"Do you want to go out with me?"* yelled Harry, who was now so covered in feathers that it looked as if he'd been attacked by molting pigeons.

"All right, that's enough of that," announced Ron and, in a classic move used by older brothers throughout history, stepped forward and firmly closed the bedroom door in his sister's face. Then he turned on Harry, and looked at him sternly.

"You're drunk," he said.

Harry glared at him. "I am not drunk."

"Yes, you are," said Ron somberly. "Drunk on power." He pointed at the bed. "Sit *down*, Harry."

Rather to Ron's amazement, Harry sat. "That wasn't very nice of me, was it," he said, glumly, staring at the floor.

"No," Ron agreed, walked over to the bed, and sat down next to Harry. "You owe Ginny an apology. But that's for later. Right now, I think you'd feel better if you didn't think about Malfoy--"

"I'm not all that angry with Malfoy," said Harry.

Ron, realizing his mouth was open, shut it hastily. "Well, if you're not angry at Malfoy, who are you so pissed off at?"

"Hermione," said Harry, through his teeth.

Ron ducked as a glass pitcher with a handle carved in the shape of a snake whipped past his head and shattered against the far wall.

"Bloody hell, Harry," he said, with reluctant admiration. "That was cool!"

"Yeah, if only I could do this sort of stuff when I wasn't *totally hacked off!*" yelled Harry, as the wardrobe door burst open and the clothes inside it exploded outward like a burst of fireworks.

They whipped through the air like manic birds and Ron looked down as something struck him on the shoulder. It was a pile of Draco's socks and underwear. "Well," he said. "I guess this answers the eternal 'boxers or briefs?' question, doesn't it?" He grinned at Harry. "Lavender and Parvati will be so pleased to know that Malfoy wears-" he peered at the label on the band - "Calvin Klein Wizardwear boxer shorts. Who knew?"

He glanced over at Harry, who looked both angry and as if he were trying not to laugh. "Come on, Harry, crack a smile; it won't kill you." He tossed the boxer shorts aside, and glanced at his friend. "I know you said you aren't pissed off at Malfoy, but you did choose his bedroom to have your tantrum in, didn't you?"

Now Harry did smile -- a bit reluctantly, as if it hurt. "Yeah, well, I didn't say I exactly had fluffy bunny feelings for the guy, did I?"

Ron didn't reply.

Harry glanced over at him quizzically, and started. Ron was staring, with a look of fixed alarm, at a vague point across the room.

"What..?" Harry started to say, but Ron, with surprisingly fast

reflexes, clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Shh," he whispered, unnecessarily. "Look at the wardrobe."

Harry looked. And started. The wardrobe, a large and heavy piece of furniture the size of three Hagrids, was rocking back and forth on its four carved feet. Harry glanced over quickly at Ron.

"There's something in there," Ron muttered.

Harry nodded. "Or someone," he tried to say, around Ron's fingers.

Ron took his hand off Harry's mouth. "What do you think...?"

The wardrobe gave a another, stronger wobble, almost as if it might tip over.

"Wands out," hissed Ron, getting to his feet and fumbling in his robes. Harry followed him, taking his own wand out and holding it in front of him.

Moving as silently as they could, they edged across the room, Ron just slightly ahead of Harry, and paused in front of the wardrobe. Ron, standing in front of it, reached out a hand for one of the doors. He glanced sideways at Harry, who nodded.

Ron threw the doors open.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then something exploded out of the wardrobe with the force of a cannonball, and careened into Ron, knocking him to the ground. His wand went skittering out of his hand and he yelled out loud in pain, throwing his arms up to protect his face from the intruder - which, Harry saw, had grayish, leathery skin and whirling red eyes, and long, spatulated fingers that it wrapped around Ron's throat.

It was a demon.

\*\*\*

Scowling, Ginny stalked down the corridor, found the stairs, and stomped down them, making as much noise as she possibly could scuffing her shoes on the stone. Not that there was anyone around to hear her. Useless, she thought. They all think I'm useless. Even Ron, shutting the door in my face; Sirius and Lupin, telling me to get lost...

Then there was the fact that Harry had asked her out. Well, all right, she had to admit, it hadn't been a sincere offer. More like a tragic cry for help. Not that she minded - she was surprised to find that in fact, she didn't care at all, one way or the other.

She crossed the large, empty drawing room, walking (without knowing it) over the trapdoor that led to the dungeons. She had no particular goal in mind, she knew; at least, not a material goal. She was simply hoping to see Draco, hoping that if she turned another corner, he might be standing there, looking tall and pale and irritable but perhaps, open to be apologized to? Because she very much wanted to apologize to him now for having kicked him in the ribs. *What if had been me, a year ago, she thought, and it had been Harry who'd taken the love potion and showed up at my door suddenly. Would I have been able to send him away out of friendship for Hermione?*

She very much doubted it.

As she left the drawing room, the sound of voices arrested her attention. She was in the corridor outside the dining room, and turning her head, she could see Hermione and Narcissa sitting at the enormous table, underneath the tapestry of the Malfoy family crest. Hermione was anxiously playing with a cup of tea, and Narcissa was looking at her with detached sympathy.

"I'm just really, really, sorry," Hermione was saying, in a muffled voice. "I should have told Harry the truth right off. I just thought I could handle it myself. I feel terrible about what he must be thinking now. And Draco..." She looked up at Narcissa worriedly. "It can't have been pleasant for him, either."

*Oh, well spotted*, thought Ginny, irritably.

"He must care about you a great deal," said Narcissa, "to have given you that."

And she pointed at the Epicyclical Charm around Hermione's throat.

Hermione looked wretched. And Ginny, feeling equally wretched now, turned away and walked off down the corridor.

\*\*\*

Draco flew like he had never flown before, racing his broom through gathering clouds, against a sky slowly darkening to the color of ink. If Harry could have seen him, he would have been amazed, impressed even - it wasn't just that he flew fast, but recklessly and with precision, grazing the tops of trees, skimming the surface of ponds, whipping his broom sideways, turning upside down because he could. Until he slowed finally, and plunged towards the ground, skidding to a halt.

He was on the grounds of Malfoy Mansion again, at the edge of the Bottomless Pit. The sky was iron-colored, streaked with faint charcoal markings like the markings inside a seashell, and the Pit stretched out in front of him, deep and black and endless. He walked to the edge, knelt down, and was violently and rather unexpectedly sick over the side. When his stomach had stopped convulsing, he sat back, and reached without thinking for the sword behind his shoulder.

He'd put a spell on it, to keep it invisible - it seemed unlikely to him that even a Malfoy would be allowed to walk uninvited into a mental institution carrying a whacking great sword - and now, without thinking, he ran his left hand over it, taking the glamour off. The sword sprang into life under his hand, bright silver under the gray twilight, the gems in the hilt glittering like eyes.

*You wanted it the moment you saw it, touched it, you know what it is: it's your future, and you can't walk away from it.*

Draco sat up and looked at it for a moment without moving. He slid his grip up over the hilt, on to the blade, and squeezed hard, feeling the whisper-sharp edges of the sword slicing into his skin, and the blood starting to flow. It hurt only a very little bit, but enough to get him to his feet.

He walked to the edge of the pit, looked down, saw only blackness. He lifted the sword in his left hand and held it out in front of him -

Visions of what has been, what is now, what will be if you want it -

--And threw it.

There was of course, no noise as it disappeared into the darkness, flipping end over end, gleaming and turning and vanishing, eaten up by the Pit.

Feeling extremely weary, he turned his back on the Pit and walked to his broomstick. As he bent to pick it up, he saw something glitter in the grass.

*No.*

It was the sword, gleaming and bright and perfect. Draco had been holding out his hand for his Firebolt - now the sword hummed and trembled and leapt into his grip, resting there. As if it belonged.

*You can't walk away from it.*

*It's what you are.*



\*\*\*

"Ron!" yelled Harry, and tried to race over to his friend, but he slipped on broken glass and feathers and fell forward onto his hands. A sharp pain shot through his hands as they made contact with the glass-strewn floor. His wand skidded out of his grip, clattering across the flagstones. I don't need it anyway, he thought, getting swiftly to his feet.

Ron was putting up a good fight - he had rolled over on his back with the demon on top of him, and was kicking at it with his feet. His hands were at his throat, trying to loosen its grip on his windpipe. He had dropped his wand, Harry saw -

Without thinking, Harry lifted his right hand and pointed it at the demon. "*Impedimenta!*" he shouted.

White light shot from his fingers and struck the demon in the chest, knocking it backwards. Ron immediately threw himself to the side, breaking its grip on his throat, and leaped to his feet, backing towards Harry. One of his hands was at his throat, which was necklaced with livid red marks.

Harry looks sideways at him. "You all right?"

Ron nodded, sucking in gasps of air.

Harry turned and stared at the demon, which was kneeling on the floor, glaring at them out of whirling red eyes. He knew immediately that it wasn't the same demon that had broken into his and Draco's bedroom at school - how Harry knew that, he couldn't have said. But it was certainly one of the same breed. It had the familiar long, spatulated fingers, each tipped with a wickedly sharp pointed nail, and the same red eyes.

"Harry Potter," it said, and its voice was like the other demon's voice, a crackling bonfire sound.

Harry eyes narrowed. "You know who I am?"



The demon made a hissing sound. "Soon you will die," it announced.

Harry's eyes widened.

Ron looked indignant. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded in a croaky voice, massaging his throat.

The demon's eyes rested on Harry. "You *know*," it hissed.

"Why is it," said Harry, in an unpleasantly calm voice, "that demons never have anything *good* to say? It's all 'Soon you will die' and 'Hell is coming' and 'Beware your doom.' Never just, 'Seasons Greetings from the Underworld!'"

The demon stared at them.

"No sense of humor," said Ron, shaking his head.

All at once, the demon lunged at Ron, its hands outstretched. Ron ducked aside, and the demon landed on all fours, turned and faced them. "*Harry Potter* -"

"Shut up!" yelled Harry, stepping between the creature and Ron. He felt a surge of rage - every ounce of rage that he'd been feeling for the past few hours crystallizing into a sharp icy blade that twisted itself violently inside his chest. He felt something break free - something inside him coming unmoored, something important. He threw his wand aside, his hand pointing itself at the creature that was threatening him - and then whatever it was inside him that had been rising tore free -- he felt it rip through his blood and his veins and his hand and shoot from his fingers like a bolt of white lightning.

The bolt of light struck the demon in the chest. It gave a startled whining cry as it flew backward and slammed hard into the wall with an unpleasant squelching noise. Limply, it crumpled to the ground and lay there like a heap of rags.

But Harry wasn't done. He could still feel the white light burning in his veins and he wanted to do something - something destructive,

something violent, something -

His eyes lit on the wardrobe. The wardrobe, in fact, in which he had once found Hermione kissing Draco. Huge, heavy, made of oak, at least eight feet tall.

He turned and directed his hand at it, and it lifted a few inches off the ground. He felt the dragging pull of the weight of it somewhere inside himself, as if he were yanking on a pulley.

Go, he thought at it. *Go*.

With a groaning creak that he could feel inside, it flew into the air, and now it was out of his control, as if he had launched it from a catapult - it shot across the room, crashed into the far wall, flipped over, and landed on top of the demon's immobile body with a rending crash.

"Harry!" he heard Ron yelling, as if from a long way away. "Enough!"

He felt Ron's hands on his shoulders, shaking him, and lowered his hands. He suddenly couldn't seem to get enough air, and staggered backward, nearly crashing into the bed.

"Harry-" Ron stared at his friend, who looked white and drained, his hair and clothes drenched in sweat, as if he'd just run a marathon. He was breathing in great gasps of air, bending forward, his hands on his knees. Vaguely aware that someone was pounding on the bedroom door, leaned down to look at Harry's face. "Harry, are you okay?"

Harry nodded without looking up.

"Breathe," Ron instructed him, and then wondered if this was good advice. Harry didn't seem to be having trouble breathing, in fact he seemed to be breathing too much - hyperventilating. "Come on, just calm down, Harry," he said. The pounding on the door was getting louder. "Are you going to pass out?"

At that moment, the door, which had been shaking on its hinges,

burst open with a sound like crackling gunfire.

Sirius, Narcissa and Lupin burst in, Hermione behind them. She paused in the doorway, a hand over her mouth, as the adults raced over to Harry and Ron.

"What the hell happened?" demanded Sirius, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"There was something in that wardrobe - some kind of thing -" said Ron. "It attacked me."

"I hit it," said Harry shortly, still trying to catch his breath.

"With what?" said Sirius, staring round-eyed at the wreckage.

"With the wall," said Harry.

"And then with the wardrobe," said Ron, helpfully. "It was really cool!" he added, then, catching Sirius' quelling glance, added hastily, "in a bad, destructive, and probably illegal sort of way."

"It was a demon," said Harry, still sounding choked and breathless.

They all glanced over towards the demon's body. Only a leathery gray arm was visible, protruding beneath the wreckage of the half-destroyed wardrobe.

"Well, I think you killed it dead," said Ron. "Good on you, Harry!"

"No, he didn't," said Sirius. "Its fingers are moving."

Several things happened at once.

Narcissa spun around. Lupin, looking suddenly anxious, reached for his wand. Ron turned to gaze at the wardrobe in astonishment. And Harry suddenly straightened up, stared at the wreckage of the wardrobe and the demon's twitching arm, felt a wave of dizziness spreading over him, and announced:

"I'm going to faint, I think."

Sirius, jumping backward, was just in time to catch him as he fell.

\*\*\*

Draco landed in the garden, just inside the gate emblazoned with its design of serpents and M's. He dismounted his broomstick, propped it against the wall, and glanced around.

It had started to rain: not hard, but a fine, thin drizzle. The grounds of Malfoy Mansion were silvery-black in the cloudy moonlight. Even in the darkness Draco could see the black score marks along the earth where poisonous, magical plants had been ripped up, and where heavy objects had been dragged away. It was odd to be on the grounds and not have to remember how to circumvent the dozens of jinxes, hexes and nasty surprise death spells that had once enclosed the place like an invisible magical fence. Without them, the place seemed alien. Strange.

I don't belong here, either.

Leaving his broomstick leaning against the wall, he walked towards the house, ducking under the wet branches of the trees (at least they haven't torn those down). He passed the clearing where there had once been a family of giant spiders, crossed the dragon-shaped bridge that had once been rigged with Explosive Hexes, turned the corner of the house, and nearly yelled out loud as a hand reached out of the darkness and grabbed at his sleeve.

Years of fencing practice and Quidditch had given him fast reflexes. He whipped around, seized hold of the arm, and used it to flip the intruder - who admittedly put up very little resistance - onto the ground.

The intruder landed in the mud with an indignant, muffled cry. The hood fell back, revealing a pale face surrounded by a tinselly cloud of silver hair, tilted, dark-blue eyes, and a familiar, scowling mouth.

"Fleur?" Draco said, in disbelief. As the adrenaline drained out of his

body, his legs started to shake, and he leaned back against the wet stone wall. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," he added, sternly. "You should stamp your feet, or yodel, or something."

Fleur continued to scowl. "You knocked me down," she said. "That wasn't very nice."

"I didn't know it was you," he pointed out. "You start hanging about in other people's gardens, wearing a hooded robe and looking mysterious, your motives will get misinterpreted. It's just one of those things."

Now she smiled at him. Raindrops trammelled her fine silvery hair and beaded the edges of her lashes. It was a rather fetching effect. She held out one hand for him to take. Even though she was sitting on the ground in a mud puddle, she managed to look imperious. "Help me up," she commanded.

He grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet. She looked down at her muddy silver robes, scowled, and ran her right hand down them. "*Abstergo!*" he heard her mutter, and in a moment, her robes were sparkling clean.

"Nicely done," he said, with genuine admiration. "But why are you here?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "I think you know," she said.

He shook his head. "No, I really don't."

"I think you do. Remember?" she added suggestively. "You and me...in my room...there were butterflies in pretty colors..."

He frowned. "Is this one of those word association games? You say 'puppy', I say 'kitten', you say 'girl', I say 'boy', you say 'party', I say, 'let's all get piss-drunk and take our clothes off'?"

Fleur stamped her foot. "Now you are being deliberately stupid," she said.

"Not really, but I'm flattered that you think so."

She pouted. "It is very boring at school without you."

"I'm sure that's true, but -"

"And you owe me a favor," she said.

That checked him. "I what?" Then he remembered. Multicolored butterflies, Fleur hitting him hard on the shoulder and saying, *You owe me, Draco Malfoy.*

*Oh, no.*

"How do you think I found you?" she added. "It is old magic. You owe me a favor, it makes a connection between us. I can find you anywhere."

Draco rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes. "Now really isn't a good time, Fleur. I've had a very, very bad day."

She shook her head. "No, no," she said. "You don't get to choose when you repay favors, Draco. That is not the nature of favors. You gave me your word."

He looked at her sidelong. It was easy to forget that a rather lively intelligence lived behind the wide eyes and decorative pout, but he knew it was true.

"You never would have found that girl of yours if it hadn't been for me," Fleur pointed out.

"She's not my girl," he said, automatically. Then he did a double-take, and stared. "How did you know about that?"

"Remember the veela in the garden at the tower?"

"Yes, vividly."

"Those were my cousins."

"Those veela? They were your cousins? How do you know?"

Fleur shrugged her elegant shoulders. "They told me they met you." She smiled. "They liked you very much."

"I'm thrilled to hear it. How did they know who I was?"

"I had told them about you, of course!" said Fleur, opening her dark blue eyes very wide. "I had asked my cousin Flora to check into the Malfoy family bloodline. I wanted to make sure you and I were not too...closely related."

"To closely related for what? Marriage?" he said, with sarcasm. Then, seeing her expression, he checked himself. "Marriage? Are you mad? I'm sixteen!"

"You won't be forever."

"Actually, I probably won't live to see seventeen at this rate, so in a way I will be sixteen forever, but that's rather depressing, so let's move on. You mean those veela let me go because they knew you wanted to marry me?"

"Yes," said Fleur, with exquisite simplicity.

Draco goggled at her. "That's ridiculous!"

"There's nothing ridiculous about marriage," said Fleur, looking severe.

"Do you still want to marry me?"

She shook her head. "As it turns out, we're very distant cousins. So it wouldn't work."

"That *is* too bad," he said, with immense relief.

"However," she said, stopping dead and turning to put a hand on his shoulder, "we can still have sex. As long as no one knows about it."

He nearly tripped over a tree root. "What?"

"There is the little matter of the favor you owe me."

Draco blinked at her. "You want me to have sex with you? As a favor?"

Fleur smiled at him, shrugged, and nodded. "Yes."

"Are - you sure?" he said, in disbelief. "I mean, you could ask me for anything. Anything. Cash? I've got lots of cash."

In answer, Fleur crossed her arms and looked at him with a wry expression. He wasn't quite sure, but it looked as if she were tapping her foot impatiently on the ground. "I don't want cash," she said. "I want you."

Draco stared at her in utter disbelief. "Right now? Right here?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Oh." He blinked at her. She was very beautiful in the half-light, and it was rather flattering, and well, he was sixteen years old.

He shrugged. "Yeah, all right, then."

\*\*\*

Out of unconsciousness, Harry woke suddenly, with a feeling as if he were being suffocated. He gasped for air, and immediately, there were hands on his shoulders and a female voice was telling him to lie back, and breathe. A cool hand touched his forehead, brushing back his hair. He blinked hard, unable to see without his glasses. "Hermione?" he said faintly, although he knew immediately it wasn't her, knew the feel of the touch of her hand by heart, this was someone else.



"It's Narcissa," said the voice, gently. "Lie back down."

"No," said Harry, mutinously. He struggled upright and leaned back against the headboard, blinking.

Narcissa watched him with concern. He seemed all right, although very pale. She could feel that she was holding herself back from what she wanted to do, which was to put her arms around this boy - - who reminded of her son despite the fact that he looked and sounded nothing like him - to put her arms around him and to comfort him and stroke his hair. But to do that would be to make a child out of him, and she could see just by looking at him that he was very nearly no longer that. He would resent it, she was sure. So she held herself back from touching Harry, only reached for his glasses and put them very gently into his hand, and said, "Can you sit up?"

"Yeah," he said, pushing his glasses onto his nose and blinking. "I'm fine." To demonstrate, he sat up, paling only very slightly as he did so. "I feel fine," he said, again. "Where's Hermione?"

"In the library with Ron, researching," she said, matter-of-factly. "And Sirius and Remus went to lock up that thing that attacked you. They're putting magical wards on one of the cells right now."

"It's not dead?"

Narcissa shook her head. "Not dead, but unconscious. Sirius is hoping that when Dumbledore gets here, he can help them figure out what it is."

"I can help them figure out what it is," said Harry, making a move to get up. "I've seen one before."

Now Narcissa did touch him - she put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently back down on the pillows. "Just rest a minute, Harry. You need to get your strength back. After what you did--"

She broke off as his eyes widened, and she saw him glancing around the room, seeing the incredible wreckage of the room: the crushed

wardrobe, the smashed candlesticks and bottles, the burst pillows. "I-" he began, looking stunned. "I'll pay for all this, I've got money, I can-"

"No, you won't," said Narcissa, firmly. "This your house, Harry. Not that I'm saying that you can go around wrecking all the furniture, and Sirius will probably have you de-gnoming the garden from now until Doomsday, but there will be no paying anyone. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, looking slightly befuddled.

"Anyway," she added, "I think you've punished yourself sufficiently. You do realize why you fainted, don't you?"

Harry shook his head.

"To do what you did - to expend that much magic in one burst - well, that energy has to come from somewhere. That's part of what a wand is for; most wizards don't have enough magic in themselves to perform spells without some kind of aid. Wands also help you focus your energy. What you did was just pour magic out of yourself, and without even a wand to channel it, it just flooded out of you - drained your energy. If you'd gone on, you could have knocked yourself out, or killed yourself. You have to be careful, Harry."

Harry looked down, scuffling his hands together nervously.

"And you have to teach my son to be careful, too," she added, in a slightly less even tone.

Harry glanced up quickly, looking astonished. "Malfoy?" he said, and checked himself. "I mean - he's already very careful. He's one of the most ... careful people I've ever met."

"You don't like him," she said.

"Sure I do," said Harry, weakly. "I think he's..."

"A smug git," said Narcissa evenly. "That's all right. Sometimes he

is."

She smiled at Harry, who stared at her, openmouthed.

"There's someone besides me who's been waiting for you to wake up," she went on, dropping her voice.

Harry looked as if he immediately knew exactly who she meant: Hermione, of course. He closed his mouth, and pressed it into a thin line. "I don't want to see her."

Narcissa looked at Harry, who raised his chin defiantly. And in that moment, she thought, he actually did, in some way, resemble Draco. In his stubbornness, if nothing else. "Not even for a minute?"

"No."

"You're going to have to see her eventually-"

"Not alone."

"She loves you."

Harry now looked terribly uncomfortable. "I don't think-"

"Of course not, how could you?"

Harry blinked, feeling wretchedly confused and somewhat beleaguered. "How could I *what*?"

"Think. How could you think of anything, except how horrible this situation is, how utterly awful for both of you?"

"Er," said Harry. "Is this advice? Because I don't really think that..."

"You don't think I know what I'm talking about," said Narcissa, firmly. "Because I don't know you. And in a way, you're right. I don't know you very well, Harry. And the grown-up in me wants to tell you that you're sixteen and you'll get over Hermione and to move on and not to worry. But as a person who has seen you two together,

all I can tell you is that in my life, I have never seen anyone look at anyone else the way she looks at you. Unless it's the way you look at her. I wouldn't throw that away if I were you."

Harry, who had gone alternately red and white during this speech, stared at Narcissa with wide eyes as she stood up, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, and squeezed it lightly. "Keep it in mind," she said, and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

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"Why me?" Draco asked, as Fleur started to take off his jacket.

She paused and looked at him. "Why not you?"

"Well, you're very beautiful you know, and you could pretty much have anyone. And I'm younger than you. I mean, admittedly I'm fabulously attractive and also very rich, as well as being charming and posh and clever and all-around magnificent and hang on, all that is starting to sound very convincing. No *wonder* you like me."

"It's because you're a Magid," said Fleur, hooked her foot behind his ankle, and yanked. He fell over backward and landed on the ground, looking up at her. "And I do like you." She frowned at him. "But you are beginning to irritate me." She knelt down next to him, gracefully settling her robes around herself as she did so. "Do you know what happens to those who break a sacred vow they have made to a veela?"

He propped himself up on his elbows, which sank into the wet earth, and shook his head. "If you think that by threatening me you can get me to do whatever you want," he said, and paused, "--well, that's where you're right. But - and I am not saying this because I don't like you - there are plenty of other Magids back at school; I'm hardly the only one."

Fleur put her hands on her hips. "Like who?"

"Well," he said, "What about Harry?"

Fleur looked surprised. "Harry?"

"Why not Harry?" said Draco, who couldn't believe he was saying this. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with him really. I'm not about to rush out and buy the Harry Potter Swimsuit Calendar, but you know, he's tall, and he's got dark hair, and green eyes and girls like that, and - are you unlacing my boots?"

"Well, you can't keep them on, can you?" she said reasonably, yanking off one shoe. "Oh, look you have ducks on your socks! That is so cute. And yes, Harry is also very attractive. But he is far too in love with his girlfriend."

"So am I," Draco pointed out.

She shook her head. "It's not the same."

"Why not?" snapped Draco irritably, as she yanked off his shoes.

"Because she doesn't love you back," said Fleur, and yanked off the other shoe.

"Thank you for that observation," he said, wryly. "Would you like to take a knife and stick it in my chest and twist it around a bit? Because I don't think you've quote reached your sadism quota for the evening."

In answer, Fleur put her hand on his chest and pushed him down, hard. Drawing back the hood of her cloak, she crawled on top of him, letting her long silvery hair fall down around them like a cage of shimmering strands. "You should not be depressed," she said, poking him in the ribs with her finger. "You are a Malfoy. You are rich and you are famous and when you grow up a bit you will be very good-looking. You have powers most people only dream of, and you are part-veela, which is a very good thing to be. You have nothing to be depressed about."

"What do you mean when I grow up a bit? I'm good-looking now!" he protested, propping himself up on his elbows.

Fleur giggled. Because of the way she was sitting, with her hands on his chest, he actually felt the giggle vibrate through his ribcage.

"And you've no idea what I'm depressed about," he added. "No idea."

"So tell me."

And, rather to his utter amazement, he did, starting with the flight to find Hermione, continuing on through the love potion and winding up with his visit to his father that afternoon. When he was done he felt ever so slightly, although not entirely, better. "And there you have it," he finished. "My father's a maniac and I'm some kind of spawn of the Dark Lord and now I should probably kill you before you can go to the Ministry, but frankly, I'm too tired."

"You wouldn't hurt me," said Fleur, curving her lips into a mysterious smile. "Unless I wanted you to."

"That's optimistic of you. Did you miss the part of the story where I'm evil?"

"Oh, evil," said Fleur, making a dismissive gesture with her hand. "There is no such thing." She leaned forward and started to run her finger meditatively up and down his sternum. "Things are not so black and white as you make them out to be."

"Oh great, a lecture on moral relativism, just what I don't need. My father says I'm evil and he is the expert in that department, so I think I'm perfectly justified in being worried and okay people usually ask before they do that, what are you *doing*? Stop!" He grabbed her hand. "Didn't you hear any part of anything that I just told you?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at him, biting her lip in what looked like either thoughtfulness or vexation, he wasn't sure. She was extremely pretty; probably, in fact, the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. Beautiful in an entirely different way than Hermione, who was beautiful in the bright flashes of her personality and intelligence that showed through everything she did.

"Are you telling me *no*?" she said.

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm telling you-" he began, and then broke off. He had a strange urge to laugh, but repressed it. "Sod it. It's not like I've got a lot of virtue to protect. If you want to kiss me, kiss me."

"All right," she said, and leaned forward.

At first, the kiss landed rather awkwardly on the side of his mouth, so he reached up to take hold of her shoulders to pull her into a better position. He sat forward a little, leaning into the kiss, sliding his hands up into her spun-silk hair - her mouth was cool, and tasted of lemons - and was just beginning to enjoy it when a thunderous, explosive noise split the clearing.

He jerked away from Fleur, who, unbalanced, fell to the side, landing on her knees. "Ooof," she said, irritably. "What's wrong with you?"

But Draco was staring past her, towards the dragon-shaped bridge that arched over the now-dry pond. A large chunk of the iron railing had, for no apparent reason, torn itself free and collapsed sideways, landing in a clump of twisted metal on the muddy dirt. That was the noise that he had heard. "What..?" he began.

"Oh," said Fleur, following his gaze. "Yes, that's because we're both Magids, you know? When emotions are generated between us like that -" She made a very expressive, very French gesture with her hands - "Boom!"

"Boom?" said Draco, staring at her in disbelief. "My kissing you sets off some sort of - death ray - and all you can say is Boom?"

She giggled. "It's also because we're both part-veela. It's a very unusual combination, you know. I just think we should make the most of it." She winked at him. "It could be really, really fun."

"Fleur," he said, feeling suddenly annoyed, "when I think about

myself doing something really, really fun, it doesn't usually end up with me getting myself really, really killed. Which I think is what's going to happen here, so I'm sorry, but I'm just going to have to keep on owing you a favor."

She smiled sidelong. "Not necessarily," she said.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"There is," she said, "Something else you could give me..."

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When Lupin walked into the library, he found Ron and Hermione sitting at the desk, up to their ears in books. Hermione had delegated to Ron the task of researching Salazar Slytherin's history. His red head poked up above a stack of books with titles like *Slytherins through the Ages*, *Evil Dark Wizards and the Bad Stuff they Did*, *the Handbook for Evil Overlords*, and *Really Cunning Plans: An Overview*, by Salazar Slytherin himself.

Hermione herself was surrounded by books with titles like *Counterspells: A Commentary*; *Love Potions: Legend or Reality*, and *Swift Spell Reversals: When You've Really Bugged Up and Need A Quick Fix*.

Hermione was glancing wearily over at Ron. "Found anything?"

"A fat lot of nothing," said Ron from behind the books, "unless you're really interested in Blood Rituals of the Eleventh Century, which I, for one, am not. You?"

"Nothing useful." She turned her gaze to Lupin as the door shut behind him, and said, "Where's Sirius?"

"Hello to you, too," said Lupin, coming over to glance at the stack of books on the desk. "He's getting Harry."

"Sorry, Professor," said Hermione, with a faint smile. "And sorry about messing up the library-" she made a sweeping gesture with



one hand, indicating the mess she and Ron had made, and nearly knocked a book off the desk as she did so.

Lupin caught it in one hand. "Careful," he said. "That's the book I've been trying to translate."

Hermione glanced down at it, and an odd look crossed her face. "Let me see it," she said.

Wordlessly, Lupin handed it to her. She opened it, glanced at one page, and handed it back to him. "When Harry gets here," she said, "show it to him."

Lupin looked blank. "Show it to Harry?"

Ron snorted. "Just do it," he said. "Hermione's got that look she gets when she knows something. Best go along with it."

"I do not get a look," said Hermione, sulkily.

"Do too," said Ron, and this illuminating exchange might have continued indefinitely if the door to the Library had not opened at that moment, admitting Sirius and with him, Harry.

Hermione glanced surreptitiously at Harry over the top over her book. *I can't believe I've been reduced to this*, she thought gloomily, *sneaking glances at my own boyfriend and hoping he doesn't notice*. He looked, as Ron had said he was, perfectly healthy, if tired: he was a little pale, and looked ruffled, as if from sleep. He gave a general nod in the direction of Hermione, Ron, and Lupin, and went back to staring at the window.

"Sirius," said Ron, putting down the book he'd been reading. "What happened with the demon?"

"It's in the dungeon, in stasis in one of the cells," said Sirius. "It's surrounded by wards." He glanced at Lupin. "That should hold it until Dumbledore gets here."

"What do you think it wanted?" said Ron.

It was Harry who answered. "That bloody sword of Malfoy's," he said. "I'm fairly sure that's what it wanted."

Sirius glanced at him. "How do you know?"

Harry sighed, and launched into the story of the demon's initial visitation. When he had finished, Lupin and Sirius exchanged dark looks. "I told Draco it was evil," said Lupin, unhappily, "I told him it was a possessed object. Why did he feel that he had to have it?"

Ron snorted. "Telling Malfoy that something is evil is like telling Dudley something's made out of toffee. It brings out this whole primal 'must have that' side of him." He caught Hermione's glare, and glared back. "You didn't see him when Harry was telling him he shouldn't bring it," he said. "It was scary."

Lupin glanced over at Harry. "You told him not to bring it and he got...scary?" he said.

Harry looked as if he wanted to squirm. "There was a certain scare factor," he admitted. "But he mostly just seemed to think it was very powerful, and necessary." He turned to Lupin. "Do you think it wanted the sword?"

"Hard to say," said Lupin. "Demons are strange creatures, devoted to sowing discord. But they rarely attack or kill humans. They are far more given to driving rigged bargains. They are greedy, rather than dangerous."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Driving bargains, eh?"

Hermione looked over at him. "What?"

Ron was tapping his fingers on the desk. "Well, if anyone seems likely to be the type to go around driving bargains with the forces of darkness..."

"Driving bargains in exchange for what?" snapped Hermione, in exasperation.

Ron looked at her. So did Sirius, Lupin, and even Harry, although he looked just as quickly away.

"Well," said Ron, voicing what they were perhaps all thinking, "You. He's got you in love with him now. Isn't that what he always wanted?"

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After leaving Harry, Narcissa considered going to look for Sirius -- she wanted to see him - but it seemed to her that he had enough to contend with at the moment. *The house is full of children*, she thought, turning to go downstairs. It was a pleasant irony in a way, since she had always wanted more children after Draco, but Lucius had made that, like so many other things, impossible. *The house is full of children*, she thought again, *Except my own*.

She was worried about Draco. Not panicked, since she knew well enough that he could take care of himself. He always had. But worried. Of course, it was a habit of his to go off by himself when something bothered him. It was *what* was bothering him that was worrying her.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she turned right and walked through the drawing room into a smaller room beyond it. This was a room that had always been one of her favorites - it was much smaller than most of the rooms in the Mansion, and had an enormous fireplace. The walls were lined with bookshelves - ordinary books, not the enchanted ones that made up the bulk of Lucius' library. There were several overstuffed armchairs scattered around the room, looking worn, but very comfortable. Narcissa crossed the room to a bookshelf, took down a faded blue album, and sat down in a chair opposite the fireplace. She opened the album, but it was too dim to see, so she reached for her wand and pointed it at the empty grate.

"*Incendio!*" she murmured.

Immediately cheerful red-orange flames burst into life, warming the

room and illuminating it. It was now light enough for Narcissa to see that she was not, in fact, alone in the room. Ginny Weasley was curled up along the sofa, her head on her arms. Narcissa reached for her wand again to dim the fire, but it was too late, Ginny was already sitting up, blinking sleepily. When she caught sight of Narcissa, she blushed.

"Sorry," she said, sitting up and smoothing back her hair. "I didn't mean to collapse in your living room - I was just so knackered."

"It's fine," said Narcissa, with a smile. "You all must be exhausted."

Ginny dipped her head so that her hair fell forward across her face. "I was wondering," she said, and paused. "Is, er, Draco back yet?"

"No, not yet," said Narcissa, turning her attention back to the album, which was full of wizarding photographs. She glanced up at Ginny. "I was just looking at some old photos...would you like to see?"

Ginny tossed her hair back from her face and smiled. "Are there pictures of Draco when he was a baby?"

"Multitudes," said Narcissa.

"Oh, *yeah*," said Ginny fervently, and hopped over to sit next to Narcissa on the couch.

Narcissa flipped through the earlier photos, which showed her graduation from Hogwarts - "Is that Sirius?" asked Ginny, peering at the figures in the background.

"Yes, indeed," said Narcissa. "When he was sixteen."

"Not bad," said Ginny, in the tone of an expert on the subject.

There were no photos of Lucius or of their wedding, but, as Narcissa had promised, there were plenty of pictures of Draco. He had been, as Ginny rather suspected he might, a very cute baby. She had seen pictures of Harry when he was a baby. He had been exceedingly fat and angry-looking. Which was also adorable in its way, but Draco

had been really a picture-perfect baby boy, with huge gray-blue eyes and silvery hair that stood up in wild cowlicks all around his head.

"Awww," said Ginny, melting into a puddle.

"Should I even ask," said a voice from the doorway, "what you two are doing?"

It was Draco, the adult version, looking at them with raised eyebrows. He was soaking wet, and there was mud on his boots and on the back of his jacket, as if he'd lain down in the mud. Wet, his silver hair was nearly white, a colorless sort of no-color. His eyes narrowed as he glanced from his mother, to Ginny, and back again.

"Hello, dear," said Narcissa, looking slightly guilty. "We were just looking at your baby pictures."

"Baby pictures," said Draco, flatly, and shook his head. "Well. If this isn't the cherry of cruelty on top of the sundae of despair that has been my day so far, I don't know what it is. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go find some dry clothes."

"Oh, dear," said Narcissa under her breath, as he turned around and walked away. Then she glanced sideways at Ginny. "Oh, go ahead," she said, gently. "Go after him." She smiled. "Better you than me."

Ginny didn't need to be told twice. She got quickly to her feet and raced out of the room, catching up with Draco near the stairs.

"Malfoy," she called. "Wait a minute."

He paused on the bottom stair, turned around, and looked at her. "What?" he said, rather unpleasantly. "You want me to lie down, so you can kick me in the ribs again?"

Ginny shook her head. "You're a little behind the times," she said, gently, and stepped onto the stair with him. It was surprising that he was so very wet, Ginny thought - it wasn't raining that hard outside. He must have been standing out there for a good long time. She

opened her mouth to say something about not having enough sense to come in out of the rain, then shut it again hastily at the look on Draco's face. "Hang on a minute," she said, untying the cardigan she was wearing around her waist. She reached up, and in a rough, sisterly fashion, began drying his face and hair with it. He looked at her askance briefly, but suffered her ministrations with fairly good grace. "Where have you been, anyway?" she asked.

"Around," he said.

"You don't look very happy," she said.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm wet, I'm cold, I've got mud down the back of my shirt, and I'm fairly positive that someone very nasty wants me dead."

Ginny's eyes widened. "What are you going to do?" she said.

"Die, probably," he said, looking thoughtful. "After that, I hadn't thought about it. Probably try a spot of moldering away in the earth. That seems to be the done thing."

"That's not funny!"

"I rather thought it was."

"Well, it wasn't. Contrary to what you might think, I don't want you dead."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Hermione told us," she said. "About the love potion."

"Why?"

She was startled by his vehemence. "Harry overheard us talking," she said. "I suppose she didn't really have a choice."

"Harry," he said, pressing the palm of his hand against his forehead as if he had a headache. "And everyone else? Sirius?" he added,

sounding a little wistful.

"Well, all of us. But we know it isn't your fault-"

"What does your brother say?"

Ginny's face fell.

"Thought so," said Draco. "And Harry?"

Ginny bit her lip. "He's not-"

"Not in the mood for quality time with yours truly?" Draco tried to smile, but it didn't quite come off. "Unless said quality time involves him smashing my kneecaps in with a toffee hammer, that is."

"He's actually not -" she began, and broke off, shaking her head. "Talk to him yourself," she said. "I think they're in the library."

"All right," said Draco, not moving. "I will."

"I'm sorry I kicked you," she said, quickly. "I didn't know about the potion, and I thought-"

He blinked in surprise. She could feel, with her hands on his shoulders, that he was shivering very slightly with cold. "You're sorry?" he said. "Or you're sorry *for* me?"

When Ginny didn't respond, he ducked his head to look at her. She began to pull back, feeling awkward, but he caught her left hand - the one that wasn't holding the cardigan - and lifted it, brushing his mouth across the back of her fingers so quickly and lightly that if she had blinked, she would have missed it.

"Thanks," he said, dropping her hand and turning to go.

"For what?" She stared after him, bewildered, as he darted up the stairs. "For *what*?"

But he was already out of earshot.

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"Draco wouldn't do that," said Hermione, with finality.

Ron wheeled on her. "Are you kidding?" he demanded sharply. "This is Malfoy we're talking about here. It's been the dream of his whole life to do something like that. He's probably sitting somewhere, laughing at all of us, the skulking slimeball."

Sirius interrupted. "I agree with Hermione," he said. "He wouldn't do that. He's far too proud. Induced love just isn't something that would appeal to him."

"Not normally, perhaps," said Lupin, looking grave. "But as I told him, that sword is a living thing, it has its own malign intelligence. Prolonged contact with it could warp the bearer's mind and personality, make them do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. Make them a danger...to themselves and other people around them."

Hermione shook her head. "This isn't some low-level meanness we're talking about," she said, quietly. "He wouldn't put our lives in danger, I really believe that."

"Sorry, Herm," said Ron, not ungently. "But since you're in love with the guy, you're not the most objective character witness. It's not your fault, but there it is."

Hermione wavered and fell silent, looking furious.

"In fact," added Ron, eyes dark, "what if he made some kind of - of trade with Slytherin? He joined up with him, offered him something, and in return he got Hermione. She wouldn't even know. It makes sense he'd offer Malfoy something like that - Malfoy wouldn't be interested in money, or magical power, but this is something he couldn't get on his own. Slytherin's probably got his own little army of demons, so he sent one out to pay a house call on Malfoy but it ran into me and Harry instead..."

Hermione looked desperately over from Lupin and Sirius' grave



faces to Harry, who was looking shell-shocked. "Harry," she said, and at the sound of her voice saying his name, he jumped slightly, and turned to her. "You don't believe this, do you?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly. "I don't know what to believe -"

"Maybe you should ask me," said a low, cool voice from the doorway. "Or don't you want to know what the skulking slimeball has to say for himself?"

It was Draco.

He stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb in a relaxed manner - but Hermione could tell, from the coiled tension in his shoulders, that he was far from relaxed.

Harry lowered his hands and looked over at Draco. He said, "How long have you been standing there, Malfoy?"

"Long enough," said Draco casually. "I may be a cold-blooded piece of toast, but I've got impeccable timing."

"Draco -" Hermione began, starting forward.

Ron caught her arm. "Let's hear what he has to say for himself, Hermione," he said.

All the eyes in the room were turned on Draco. He didn't move, didn't change expression, but his silver eyes spat angry sparks. "I've got nothing to say," he snarled. "Except that if you think I'd sell my soul for this, you have even less imagination than I gave you credit for."

"It takes imagination to give you credit for having a soul in the first place, Malfoy," said Ron.

For a brief moment, Draco almost looked as if he were going to laugh. "You'd be surprised," he said.

"Draco," said Sirius, leaning forward on the desk, his low voice tense. "You have to tell us what's been happening. Harry's told us some things that are very disturbing, and we need to know that-"

"You're not my father," said Draco icily, glaring at Sirius. "I don't have to tell you anything. What is it you think you need to know? That I'm not dangerous? Well, I can't promise you that. Especially if \_"

"Nobody thinks you sold your soul," interrupted Lupin, coming around the desk and approaching Draco warily, as if he were a bomb that might go off. "You're being melodramatic. We're afraid for you, not -"

"Shut up, werewolf," said Draco, evenly. "And don't come near me."

Hermione saw with a sinking heart how very angry he was. She wasn't exactly sure why, but it was hardly the first time she had run up against his pride in a situation where he felt called on to defend himself. She tried to catch his eye across the room, but he wasn't looking at her; he was looking over at Harry. And Harry was looking back at him, with an odd sort of blank look, which she couldn't quite read.

"Malfoy," he said, finally. "If there's really nothing wrong with you - then give us the sword." He held out a hand. "Give it to me."

Draco took a step back. "Fuck you, Potter," he said, and turned around as if he were going to bolt out of the room. But Lupin - who could move very, very quickly when necessary - blocked his way.

"You're not going anywhere," he said, and reached out to take hold of Draco's arm.

Draco, trying to yank his arm out of Lupin's grip, twisted sideways, nearly colliding with Lupin as he did so.

Lupin gave a sudden yell, as if of extreme pain - he fell backwards, stumbling, and landed on the floor.

Draco backed away from him, white-faced, holding his arm and staring wide-eyed, with an expression that could have been astonishment, or horror, or guilt.

"Malfoy--!" said Harry .

And Draco turned and bolted out of the room, not even bothering to slam the door behind him.

Sirius, who had dropped to his knees on the floor next to Lupin, looked wildly up at Ron, Harry, and Hermione. "Go after him!" he yelled.

They didn't need to be told twice. Feverishly, the three of them bolted out of the library and into the corridor.

Which was empty.

Harry looked up and down the hall briefly, and said, "Split up. Go, both of you," and bolted off to the right. Hermione and Ron dashed to the left, but parted ways at the end of the corridor, Ron racing down the stairs while Hermione turned to the right-- before she suddenly paused and thought: *What am I doing? I'm so stupid!*

And reached for the Epicyclical Charm around her neck.



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"Get off, Sirius. I'm fine," said Lupin irritably, pushing his friend's hands away as he struggled to sit up. He leaned back against the bookshelf, cradling his right arm against his chest. "I'm fine!" he repeated, with emphasis.

"What happened?" Sirius demanded. "What did he do to you?"

Lupin's eyes widened. "Draco? He didn't do anything to me."

"Well, it looked like he did. You grabbed him, and then you yelled and collapsed. Did he hit you? It didn't look like he even moved."

"No, he didn't hit me, he didn't even touch me," said Lupin. "It was that."

And he pointed at an object lying on the ground a few feet away that gave off a dull silvery glint.

"He must have had it in his pocket," said Lupin thoughtfully.

Sirius looked askance. "What is it? Is it dangerous?"

"Not to you," said Lupin. "Go on. Pick it up."

Looking dubious, Sirius retrieved the glinting object held it up to the light. It was the silver pendant that Slytherin had tossed to Draco, that had acted as a Portkey, although there was no way Sirius could have known that. He glanced at the odd shape of it-the sideways X, almost, but not quite, a cross.

He walked back over to Lupin, who was still sitting on the floor, cradling his arm. Sirius knelt down next to him, holding out the silver X, but Lupin shook his head. "I can't touch it," he said.

"Why not?"

"It's a Lycanthe," said Lupin. "Old magic. Protection against werewolves."

"I thought it was a crucifix," said Sirius, looking askance. "Crucifixes don't bother you, do they?"

Lupin looked aggrieved. "I'm a werewolf, not a vampire," he snapped. "It's a Lycanthe, like I said. Not a crucifix. Totally different."

Very, very old magic."

"Strange shape," said Sirius, turning it over in his hands.

"Not really," said Lupin, and smiled a funny half-smile. "Say you're walking through the forest at night," he said. "Alone. No help in sight, and you don't have a wand. Then a wolf jumps out of the darkness, straight at your throat. What do you do?"

Without thinking, Sirius threw up his arms - one across his throat, the other crossed over it, protecting his face. Making a sideways X.

"Right," said Lupin. "Lycanthe. Old magic. Like I said."

Sirius blinked and lowered his arms.

"The question is," mused Lupin, "why would Draco have something like that? They were common hundreds of years ago - when werewolves were a problem --- but now--"

He broke off as the library door flew open. Sirius leaped to his feet and spun around, obviously hoping that Harry, Hermione and Ron had managed to retrieve Draco - but it was Narcissa.

She was very pale. "Sirius -" she said, uncertainly. She was holding two letters in her hand - one, tied with a green-and-silver ribbon, Sirius knew immediately, was Snape's reply. The other she had opened already, and was holding unfolded in her shaking right hand. Sirius could see, even across the room, that it was an official-looking piece of paper, and that it was bordered with black. "Sirius," she said again. "It's Dumbledore - he and Fudge were on their way here and they were attacked - oh Sirius, I'm so *sorry*..."

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Draco, who had dashed down a little-used staircase he was fairly sure the others didn't know about, emerged out in the garden, and began racing towards the gate where he had stashed his broomstick. He was halfway there - not running, but walking quickly - when he heard footsteps on the path behind him.

Harry, he thought. He couldn't have said why, but for some reason, was sure it was Harry. It made sense, didn't it, for Harry to come after him - after all, Harry knew --

He slowed to a walk. "It's like you said, Potter," he said, without turning around. "I'm storming off. It doesn't work if you come with me."

There was a short silence, and the footsteps behind him slowed. Then he heard a voice say, "Draco. It's me."

He whirled around, and saw Hermione, and felt something that he never would have expected he could feel upon seeing her. But there it was.

Disappointment.

He had thought Harry had come after him.

And Harry hadn't.

A cold miserable anguish lanced through him like a sharp steel point, and made his voice harsh when he spoke. "You shouldn't have come after me," he said.

"Where are you going?" she demanded. "Where do you think you can run to?"

"I was pretty much concentrating on 'away from you', and figuring I'd fill in the rest of it later."

"This from the guy who thinks Gryffindors can't plan?" Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "You can't go," she said. "This is your house, where you belong. Where else are you going to find people who can help you?"

"Maybe I don't want help," he said, knowing he sounded as if he were about seven, but unable to help it.

"Maybe that just proves you need it," she said.

"And you're completely objective about whether I stay or go, I suppose?"

"God, you sound just like Ron," she said, sounding surprised rather than critical. "Of course I'm not objective. But I'd be telling you this even if - even if I wasn't in love with you."

"You're not in love with me," he snapped. "This is just a spell. A spell that makes you think you care about me. But you don't."

Hermione looked as if he had hit her. "Don't say that. I'm still your friend."

"Is that why you came bolting after me? Friendship?"

"I'm not the only one who came running after you!" she snapped. "Everyone's worried -"

*"So where are they?"*

"Looking for you!" she shouted. "But they don't know where you went, idiot. I'm the only one who can find you, because of this-" And she drew out the Epicyclical Charm, on its thin gold chain, holding it up between them. "I always know where you are," she said. "I don't get a choice about that, and neither do you."

"Why should you get a *choice*?" he almost shouted. "I don't! I don't get a choice about my family or my life or my destiny, if I've even really got one. And I don't get a choice about loving you, even though I personally think you were put here on this earth to give me pain. I mean, I know I'm not a nice person, but what the fuck did I do in my past life to deserve this? I must have run down a cartload of nuns while driving a stolen carriage on my way to sell drugs to school children."

Hermione took a shuddering breath. "When I find out how to take



this spell off - if there's some sort of way to reverse love, or change it - do you want me to use it on you, too? So you won't -"

"So I won't love you any more?" He was looking at her in sheer disbelief. "God, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. This -- this isn't even you," he said. "This isn't what you're like. That potion is turning you into someone else." He laughed, not pleasantly. "It's ironic, isn't it? The you that I love, loves Harry. This you - this is someone I don't even know." He looked at her, and something in the expression on her face made his voice soften slightly. "Never mind," he said. "It's not your fault."

"I just thought-"

"Forget it," he said, walked up to her, and put his hands on her shoulders. She bit her lip. She knew perfectly well that if he were to kiss her, she would kiss him back. She had always prided herself on her self-control, and now, not to have any, was more terrifying to her than to be suddenly blind, or suddenly deaf. She hated it, and somewhere under the potion-induced love, she could tell she was beginning to hate him, too, for what he could do to her.

He pulled her towards him, and put his arms around her - but made no move to kiss her. Just held her there, his face in her hair, his hands clenched into fists against her back. It was a very awkward hug - the first really awkward thing she had ever seen him do - as if he'd never hugged anyone before. Maybe he hadn't.

The moment she raised her own hands - to embrace him or push him away, she wasn't sure - his arms went rigid and he shoved her away from him. She felt a sudden sharp pain at the back of her neck, glimpsed a flash of gold as he stepped back from her, and saw the Epicyclical Charm glittering in his hand. He had yanked it off her throat.

"Now you can't find me," he said.

"You *idiot*," she exclaimed, and launched herself at him, grabbing hold of his sleeve and hanging on tightly. She raised her voice, and shouted, "Harry! Ron! We're over here! Harry! *Anybody!*"

"Hermione, shut up," he exclaimed, trying to wrench his arm out of her grip, but she hung on with determination. "Let me go."

"No," she said.

He looked at her. "I'm sorry, then," he said, and raised his hand, the Charm on its chain looped around his fingers, and pointed it at her -  
- "I'm sorry, Hermione," he repeated. "*Stupefy!*"

She didn't even have a chance to look surprised, just fell backwards, unconscious, onto the grass. He wanted to drop down next to her, make sure she was all right, but there was the sudden sound of running feet on gravel, and he looked up and saw Ginny, standing on the path, staring from one of them to the other. "You knocked her out?" she said, looking utterly amazed. "Draco, what on earth--?"

"Had to," he said briefly, and started to back up toward the wall, feeling behind him for his broomstick. The sound of more running feet was audible now - Harry and Ron, he thought dismally, as his hand closed around his Firebolt. He mounted it, and looked back at Ginny, standing next to Hermione on the wet ground.

"When she wakes up, tell her -" Draco began, and felt his throat close up suddenly. Ginny was looking at him, her expression unreadable in the half-light. "Oh, forget it," he finished wearily. "For once in my life, I've got nothing at all to say."

And with that, he kicked off, leaning forward to grip his Firebolt tightly, soaring upward, vanishing into the night sky.

\*\*\*

There was just enough illumination in the cell for Lucius Malfoy to see the circle he had drawn on the floor in his blood. They would not, of course, let him have a wand; he had had to bite one of the veins in his wrist open with his own teeth to get what he needed. But it was far from the worst thing he had ever been forced to do.

Moving carefully, he sat down in the center of the circle, arranging

his robes carefully around him. Then he held his hands out before him, in the left hand his son's Epicyclical Charm held loosely, its dull gold glittering in the faint light. "*Vocatio*," he whispered, and paused. Did he still remember how to do this? Yes. Yes, of course he did. "*Vocatio*," he began again, the words of the Summoning spell coming more easily to him now: *Master, I have something for you...*

#### References:

1) "Probably on account of that one time you beat him up for seven years straight when we were in school." Buffy

2) "If you think that by threatening me you can get me to do whatever you want," he said, and paused, "--well, that's where you're right." – Real Genius.

3)"I may be a cold-blooded piece of toast, but I've got impeccable timing." Buffy.

4) "I'm storming away; it doesn't work if you come with me" - Buffy, "Dopplegangland"

5) Lycanthe: The concept comes from Tanith Lee's Lycanthia, in which Lycanthes are symbols scratched in snow to keep werewolves away. I have retained the crossed-X shape.

raco Sinister

## Chapter Seven - Easy Is The Descent

"*Enervate*," Ginny whispered, and Hermione's eyes fluttered open. For a moment she looked dazed, her eyes reflecting stars and moonlight, and then she sat up and clutched at Ginny. Startled, Ginny nearly fell over, but hugged her back. "It's all right, you're all right," she said.

Hermione continued clutching at her arm, and Ginny saw that the glittering in her eyes wasn't the reflected night sky after all, but tears. "Is he gone?"

Ginny replied flatly. "He's gone."

Hermione released her hold on Ginny's arm. A number of emotions flickered across her face - hope, grief, longing, confusion. Gratitude. "I'm *glad* he's gone," Hermione said, fiercely.

"Right," said Ginny, standing up and reaching out a hand to pull Hermione up after her. "Come on, up you get."

"Okay," said Hermione, and bit back a snuffle. She raised up her hand to take Ginny's, and asked, "Did he say anything? Did you see him before he left?"

Ginny sighed. "He didn't exactly-"

"Never mind," said Hermione, quickly. "Better I don't know."

Ginny bit back the urge to speak sharply to Hermione, who was beginning to look tearful again. It was odd, she thought, Hermione had always been not just older, but so together, competent, and controlled than Ginny had always been a bit jealous. Now that she seemed to have been reduced to a wreck of her former self, Ginny found herself feeling less jealous than desperate to have the old Hermione back again. The old Hermione would have known what to do. This one just wanted to sit on the ground and blub about Draco.

Ginny thought that if Hermione said one more thing about Draco she would shake her until her hair frizzed up again.

She helped Hermione up to her feet just as Harry and Ron burst out of the shrubbery and into the clearing. Both boys were out of breath and covered in leaves and twigs. Ron spoke first. "Hermione, you all right, we heard you yelling-

"I'm fine," said Hermione, turning to look at them. "I'm fine."

Ginny saw the look of panic on Harry's face replaced quickly by relief, which was replaced by something else - a blank sort of still look. She glanced over at Hermione, who wasn't looking at Harry and had missed the interplay of emotions on his face. Then she looked back at Harry. *Why doesn't Draco ever look at me the way Harry looks at her?* she thought suddenly. *It isn't fair.*

"Where's Malfoy?" asked Ron.

"He's gone," said Hermione, in a thin voice. "He flew off."

Ron swore, and kicked the trunk of a tree.

Harry shook his head. "I can't believe you just let him go," he said, not looking at Hermione, but quite evidently speaking to her.

Hermione's expression darkened. "I did not *let* him go. He knocked me out."

"He's still gone," said Harry, glaring at her. "Isn't he?"

Hermione glared right back.

Ron looked from Harry to Hermione, then rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes, let's start sniping at each other about whose fault it is that Malfoy's finally bugged off like he's been trying to do all day anyway. *That'll* be productive."

"Wait," exclaimed Ginny, eagerly, and turned to Hermione. "The

Charm - we can use it to find him!"

Hermione shook her head. "He took it with him."

"He *took* it?" echoed Ron in disbelief. "Why? Why would he do a stupid thing like that?"

"I think it's pretty obvious why he took it," said Harry, sounding weary. "He doesn't *want* us to be able to find him."

Ginny felt her heart contract. "But we *have* to find him," she said, in a wavering voice. "He's in trouble."

"I think you're mixing up being *in* trouble with just *being* trouble," said Ron.

Harry looked despairing. "We'd better go talk to Sirius."

But by the time they arrived at the library, Sirius and Lupin were gone. Narcissa, sitting behind the desk and looking terribly strained and worried, explained to them what had happened to Dumbledore and Fudge on their way to the Manor. The official notice from the Ministry had said only that Dementors were suspected in the attack. Fudge was dead; Dumbledore was in serious condition. The Ministry had indicated that before lapsing into unconsciousness, Dumbledore had requested Sirius' presence. "They've Apparated themselves to St. Mungo's," said Narcissa, looking as if she were trying to hide how unhappy she felt. Her eyes darted from Harry's face, to Hermione's. Very quietly, she asked, "Where's Draco?"

There was a short silence. Then Harry said, "He's gone. I'm really sorry. We tried to--" He broke off and looked down, hiding his expression, but Ginny felt how miserable he was. "I'm really sorry," he said again.

Narcissa bit her lip. She was very pale. "I'd better make sure they let Sirius know," she said, rising to her feet and hurrying over to the fireplace. She took a handful of powder out of her pocket and tossed it into the flames, which glowed briefly purple. Ginny heard her say, "St Mungo's Hospital, please," before turning to Ron and Harry. Harry had his arms crossed over his chest and was looking both

furious and miserable. Ron was absently patting him on the back.

"Sirius is going to be really hacked off," said Harry, glumly.

"Do you think Draco's going to be all right?" asked Ginny, also reaching out to pat Harry on the arm.

He glanced up at her, and she saw him try to smile. "I dunno, Ginny," he said, and looked as if he were about to say something else when his eyes darted sideways. Ginny turned to see a slight shimmering in the air as Anton, one of the Malfoy family ghosts, walked calmly through the north wall. He shimmered gently into the room, becoming more solid and less transparent as he did so, and paused near Narcissa. "Madam," he said, "There are guests downstairs."

Narcissa turned away from the fire and regarded him with startled eyes. "Who is it?"

Anton cleared his transparent throat, and said, "Molly and Arthur Weasley."

Ron and Ginny looked at each other in horror. "Mum and Dad?" groaned Ron. "I forgot they were coming!"

\*\*\*

Out of a dream of dragons, Charlie Weasley woke suddenly, bolting upright in bed with a feeling of strange unease. Where this unease originated, he couldn't have said. It wasn't an anxiety born out of anything rational, but something was troubling him, niggling at the back of his mind, something, he knew, that would not let him rest until he had sorted it out.

"Damn it," he swore softly, and swung his legs over the side of the bed, reaching for the clothes he had laid out to wear the next day (a habit ingrained in him by his well-organized mother) and put them on hastily. Then he grabbed up his wand from the table next to his bed and, murmuring, "Lumos," ducked out of his tent.

Charlie followed his wandlight through the camp, dark and silent at this hour, past this last of the tents and out to the dragon pen. It was quiet, but a faint flutter of unease stirred in Charlie's stomach. Dragons slept standing up, eyes closed, heads leaning together. And they should have been asleep at this hour, the enclosure that held them silent and dark, but instead it was awash in faint bronze light - the light reflected from the open eyes of the eight or so dragons who stood awake in the center of the pen.

Charlie moved as close as he could to the wall of magical wards that enclosed the pen, and stared. Through its faint shimmer, like heat haze, he could see into the enclosure.

His heart contracted.

*There was someone inside the dragon pen.*

Mouth dry, Charlie fumbled for his wand and began frantically muttering the incantations that would create an opening in the wards large enough for him to crawl through.

*"Alohomora...pariei transe..."*

The opening gaped before him and he threw himself through it, rolled, and came up on his feet, staring around him. His mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton. It was utterly against all rules as well as all common sense for anyone to enter the dragon pen alone and unprotected. Dragons were untamable, vicious, and given the opportunity, would happily attack even the wizards that fed them.

Whispering a protective incantation, Charlie began edging slowly towards the center of the pen, moving as calmly as anxiety and stark terror allowed. He could see the intruder more distinctly now, could see a clearer outline of arms and legs and pale silver-blond hair -



Draco.

Charlie clapped a hand over his mouth to keep himself from shouting out Draco's name.

*What the hell is he doing, is he trying to get himself killed?*

Despite his astonishment, Charlie's feet kept moving, carrying him closer to the center of the enclosure and closer to Draco. Charlie could see him clearly now in the clear silver moonlight. He seemed to be simply standing very still in the middle of the circle of dragons, who rose above him like breathing statues, their scales streaming starlight. He had his hands in the pockets of his trousers and was rocking back on his heels, head tilted back, gazing up at the enormous creatures that towered above him as if they were nothing more than extremely tall and extremely interesting rock formations.

Charlie sucked in his breath as he ducked inside the circle of dragons and edged over to Draco. He reached out and put a hand on Draco's shoulder, willing the boy not to cry out in surprise.

Draco didn't. He didn't jump or look startled either, only turned and looked at Charlie with wide, dark, incurious eyes. "Hello, Charlie," he said, in perfectly normal tones.

"Hello yourself," Charlie croaked, reached forward and seized hold of Draco's arm. Using the muscles that came from toting heavy equipment every day, he yanked the boy towards him, grabbed him around the middle, and commenced dragging him backwards.

To his surprise, Draco put up very little resistance as Charlie hauled him away from the dragons, who watched with what looked like detached interest. They reached the gap in the wards and Charlie ducked into it, pulling Draco behind him by the arm. Once they were through, he let go his grip on the boy's arm and shoved him as hard as he could against the nearest tree.

The back of Draco's head hit the tree trunk with a force that looked

like it must have hurt, but he didn't change expression, just put up his left hand and rubbed at his throat. "Hey, Charlie," he said calmly.

"Hey, Charlie?" What the hell are you doing here, Draco? More to the point, what the hell were you doing?"

"I wanted to see the dragons," said Draco, unfazed. "I wanted to see them one more time."

"You wanted to see the dragons? Good God, can't you come up with anything better than that? If you wanted to look at the dragons why didn't you stand outside the bloody wards and look at them?"

"They wouldn't have hurt me," said Draco, still weirdly calm. Then he grinned. "Dunno about you, though."

"They wouldn't have *hurt* you? You're just a walking lunchbox to them, you stupid kid. You're like a sandwich on legs. God, if I hadn't just woken up, I'd beat you to a pulp myself for trying something like that. Lucky for you I'm too tired."

Draco gave him an angelic smile. "'Did they *look* like they were going to hurt me?"

Charlie stared at Draco, not really wanting to answer that. He looks *different*, he thought suddenly. Physically he was the same of course, but there was something - like a light inside him had been switched on, something that burned through his skin like lamplight through a shade. The air around him seemed to crackle with suppressed electricity. "Er," said Charlie, feeling suddenly even more worried, "Draco, are you feeling all right?"

Draco's smile didn't fade. "I feel *good*," he said, taking his hands out of his pockets and looking at them as if they were weird alien objects. "I feel like I could do anything. Anything at all. Do I look different?"

"No," said Charlie, decidedly. "You look tired, is what *you* look. You look done in. When was the last time you got any sleep?"

"Sleep?" said Draco, and now there was a faint note of alarm in his voice. "A decent night's sleep, oh I haven't had one of those in ages. Maybe two weeks."

Charlie sighed. "What you need, my boy, is some sleep. You can have the couch in my tent, I'll give you some blankets, and then we'll owl Sirius in the morning -"

"No," interrupted Draco sharply, his smile gone now.

"No what?"

"No, I don't need to sleep on your couch. Sleep is the last thing I need. I don't want to dream - I *can't* dream. One more will finish me off."

Charlie blinked in confusion. "One more what?"

"One more dream." Draco had begun walking away from the enclosure, towards the trees. "You wouldn't understand."

"Look here," said Charlie, reaching out and grabbing hold of Draco's sleeve, turning him around so they were face-to-face. "What kind of pills did you take? Blue, red or green? Oh, or did you take the whirly black kind that look like licorice allsorts? George took one of those once and spent a week thinking he was a motorbike."

"I don't think I'm a motorbike," said Draco irritably. "Look, would you just let go of my jacket? I'm perfectly fine."

"You're *not* fine," said Charlie decidedly, although he let go of Draco's arm. "You just nearly got yourself killed. And that's *my* jacket."

"Oh, what, you want it back now?"

"No, I don't want it *back*. I want you to stop being a complete prat and come back to the tent and get some sleep. And eat something. And maybe get your stomach pumped. You don't look good."

"But I feel good," said Draco, opening up his silver-black eyes very wide. "I feel great. I feel like I could do anything. I could fly, I could ride a dragon, I could -" He broke off and looked at Charlie intently. "What would you say if someone offered you powers that would allow you to rule the whole wizarding world?"

"I'd say ruling the world isn't all it's cracked up to be," said Charlie gently. "Long hours, waving at people all the time, never your own boss..."

"And now with the mockery."

"I'm not mocking you," said Charlie, gently. "I'm worried about you. Trying to feed yourself to dragons, asking me crazy questions, I know you've been through a lot lately but -"

"You *don't* know. Even I don't know. I can't believe I'm even confused about this. What's to be confused about? On one hand, certain death. On the other hand, power and eternal life and all my wishes granted. I could be young and pretty forever. Not everyone can say that." He looked up at Charlie and shook his head. "I hate Harry. This is all his fault."

"What the bleeding hell does any of this have to do with Harry?" said Charlie in exasperation. "Okay, that's about enough." He reached out and grabbed at Draco's wrist, meaning to pull the boy away from his broom -and sucked in his breath in surprise. Without thinking, he exclaimed, "What's *happened* to you?"

Draco's head went up, his eyes narrowing.

Charlie could feel the shocked blood pounding in the wrist that he held, cold blood under colder skin - *someone with a body temperature that low must be dying*, he thought.

Draco looked at him, and his eyes showed anxiety but no surprise. "Did I hurt you?"

"You're freezing cold," said Charlie. "Like ice...are you ill?"

"It's happening fast," said Draco. "Isn't it?"

Charlie just stared at him.

"I should go," said Draco, retrieving his wrist. Charlie let him. "Don't tell anyone I was here."

"Draco," said Charlie, trying to sound patient, "I can't do that. You nearly got yourself killed tonight, do you realize that?"

Draco looked at Charlie, the moonlight striking cold white sparks from his eyes. He said, "'Don't force me to make you forget you ever saw me."

Charlie blinked. "I'd really rather," he said slowly, not quite sure that he meant it, but wanting to mean it, "that you didn't go."

"You know I can do it," said Draco, as if Charlie hadn't spoken. "Promise me."

"I-" Charlie cleared his throat, feeling suddenly both bewildered and uneasy. "What makes you think I'd keep a promise like that?"

"You're a Weasley," said Draco, hoisting his Firebolt. "You won't lie."

"All right," said Charlie. "I'll promise. On one condition."

"What?"

"Let me get you some food and a change of clothes, at least."

Draco looked at him blankly for a moment before nodding. Charlie took off jogging towards his tent, his mind racing even faster than his feet. Something very odd is going on, he thought, as he threw together a quick bundle of food and some clothes - some jeans and a pile of sweaters, the boy was obviously freezing. *But it's June*, said a voice in the back of his head. *Why is he so cold?*

He was halfway positive that Draco would be gone by the time he got back, but he was still there, a quiet and oddly forlorn huddle of dark clothing and pale, untidy hair sitting at the base of the tree, holding his Firebolt across his lap as if it were a weapon.

Charlie stopped dead and stared at him. "Draco," he said. "Where's the sword? Did Sirius take it?"

"I gave it away," said Draco, standing up and flashing Charlie an smile that would give him nightmares for several years. "It'll come back. It's with me now, even when it isn't with me." With which nonsensical statement he reached out and took the bundle of clothes and food out of Charlie's unresisting hands.

"Be careful," said Charlie, realizing how inadequate this sounded. "Come back if you need -"

"Thanks, Charlie," Draco interrupted, got on his Firebolt, and took off.

Charlie was both sorry and not sorry to see him go.

\*\*\*

Lupin followed Sirius down the crowded hallway at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. As they approached the room where they had been told Dumbledore was, they saw a crowd of people gathered there. Reporters - Lupin recognized the banana-yellow robes and glittering spectacles of Rita Skeeter - doctors, and half-hysterical Ministry beaurocrats milled about like ants.

Sirius and Lupin pushed their way through the knot of people, only to be stopped at the door by a white-coated mediwizard wearing glasses and a harassed expression. He threw out an arm to block their progress. "This area is off-limits."

Sirius crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "And who are you?"

The mediwizard looked insulted. "I'm Dr. Simon Branford. I'm in charge of this floor, and this room is off-limits to everyone except-"

"I'm Sirius Black," interrupted Sirius. "I was sent for. By the *Ministry*."

"*You're* Sirius Black?" The mediwizard lowered his arm, looking sideways at Sirius. There had been a time when Sirius' face had been familiar to the entire wizarding community, but of course he looked very different now. "You'd better come in," he said. "We've been expecting you."

Sirius was about to say something rude when Lupin interceded hastily. "Thank you," he said to the doctor, who nodded his head in acknowledgement and quickly pushed the door open, gesturing Sirius in ahead of him. Dr. Branford ducked after him, and Lupin followed.

They found themselves in a narrow hallway with a single door leading off it. "There are two things I need to tell you," said the doctor, turning to face Lupin and Sirius. "One is that your wife sent a message to our Administrator for me to give to you." He looked doubtfully at Sirius, who didn't bother to correct him in regards to Narcissa, just raised an eyebrow. "She said that Draco is gone and they don't know where to find him. I assume that means something to you?"

"Yes," said Sirius, a little shortly, and exchanged a quick glance with Lupin. "That means something to me."

"The second thing," continued the mediwizard, "is that Professor Dumbledore is in a state of what we call magical stasis. Only a very limited amount of pre-approved magic can be performed in his presence. Please keep your wands in your pockets. Understood?"

Lupin and Sirius nodded their acquiescence, and followed Dr. Branford through the single door and a mid-size hospital room with white-scrubbed stone walls. The centerpiece of the room was a large bed on which lay Albus Dumbledore, a white coverlet pulled up to his chest, his eyes shut. Lupin's heart contracted to see how old and helpless he looked. Sirius was standing by the side of the bed, his hands knotted together, his face expressionless. The doctor, clutching his chart and looking very unhappy, stood at Sirius' side.

Lupin approached the center of the room, the nerves along his spine

prickling. The aura of Dark magic, faint but palpable, hung over the bed and the frail-looking man who lay there. Lupin glanced over at the doctor. "Is he going to die?"

"We don't know. He isn't dying now. Not exactly. He's in stasis. His vital signs are steady, but he can't be woken, nor does he respond to stimuli-"

"What happened to him?" interrupted Sirius, not taking his eyes off Dumbledore. "The letter said Dementors. But Dumbledore could have handled Dementors. Was there something else?"

'A very astute observation, Black," came a sarcastic voice from the door.

Lupin and Sirius turned, and stared, Lupin with astonishment and Sirius with horror.

It was Severus Snape.

He hadn't changed since the last time Lupin had seen him, three years ago now, in the Shrieking Shack in Hogsmeade. The same sallow face, dominated by hooded eyes and a sour expression. He wore starched black robes, the left arm wound with the green band that marked him as the Head of Slytherin House, his right arm banded with the yellow that meant he was on Ministry business. Lupin saw Sirius' eyes flick towards Snape's arm and knew he had noted it too.

"Professor Snape," said the mediwizard, sounding relieved.

Snape stalked past them all without favoring them with a glance, sat himself in one of the chairs next to Dumbledore's bedside, and began removing items from the pockets of his robes - Lupin glimpsed a mortar and pestle, a bag of what might have been beetle shells, and some kind of flask.

Sirius immediately sat himself down in another of the chairs, and glared at the Potions master. "What are you doing here, Snape?"



"Ministry business, obviously." Snape looked at Sirius with smooth malice. "I think the question is, what are *you* doing here?"

"The Ministry sent for me, too," snapped Sirius. "Dumbledore was on his way to see me when he was attacked. I believe they thought I could shed some light on the situation."

Snape glanced up at the doctor, who nodded.

"Perhaps nobody told you," said Snape, who had begun doing something with his mortar and pestle that Lupin couldn't quite make out; Snape's gestures were hidden by the voluminous sleeves of his robes. "Dumbledore established with the Ministry last year that if anything untoward were to happen to him, I should be in charge of the investigation into the circumstances. He gave me detained instructions, which I am following." He gave them a thin smile. "I trust you are not planning to challenge his authority in this matter?"

"What happened to Fudge and Dumbledore?" asked Lupin, trying to keep the suspicion and hostility out of his voice. "We heard Dementors-"

"Fudge is dead; you know that, of course. They're in the process of choosing a new Minister as we speak. And it wasn't Dementors," Snape added, his mouth curving violently downward. "Or at least, it wasn't *only* Dementors. They were attacked by what looked like Dementors, but the Ministry believes that that was simply illusion magic, a glamour. It looks to have been the work of a powerful Dark wizard - one more powerful even than Voldemort."

"So who was it?" Sirius snapped. Lupin could see by the slight nervous tic at the edge of Sirius' eye that always appeared when he was very annoyed, that he was forcibly restraining himself from lunging across the bed and physically beating the answers he wanted out of Snape.

"We don't know," said Snape. "That's what I'm here to find out."

"Find out from whom?"

"From Dumbledore," said Snape, quietly.

"But he's -" Sirius swept a hand towards Dumbledore's prone form, swallowed hard, and said, "He's in stasis. Not responsive."

Snape gave Sirius a hooded glare. "Perhaps if you hadn't always been skiving off in Potions class," he said coldly, "you'd have a better idea why I'm here."

Sirius left eye twitched again, more violently this time. "Useless smug git," he exploded, glaring at Snape.

"I'd prefer that you dispense with the name-calling," said Snape, glaring right back. "It serves no purpose."

"And I'd prefer that you choke to death on a garden hose, but we don't always get what we want, do we?" said Sirius, ignoring Lupin's quelling glances.

"Sirius, now's not the time," said, quietly.

"Oh, shut up, Moony," snapped Sirius, narrowing his eyes in exasperation.

"Moony?" Snape's eyebrows shot up. "You two still call each other by your childhood pet names? How adorable, in a sad, arrested-development sort of way."

Lupin stepped quickly to Sirius' side and put his hand firmly on his friend's shoulder. This was partly to show his support and partly to remind Sirius that, if necessary, Lupin could hold him down and forcibly prevent him from jumping at Snape. In fifth year at school, Lupin had once thrown Sirius across the Gryffindor common room. It was easy even for his friends to forget how strong he actually was. "Professor Snape," said Lupin calmly. "We're all here for the same reason. Let's try to keep this from getting personal."

Snape ignored him, busy finishing doing whatever it was he had been doing with his mortar and pestle. He turned around now, holding in one hand a flask half-full of liquid, and in another a small clear bag of blackish powder. He proceeded to pour the

powder into the liquid, shook the flask several times, and glanced up. "Very well, Lupin," he began -

And was interrupted by a sudden surge of noise from the corridor outside the room. Lupin, whose hearing was quite sensitive, could distinguish a jumble of voices all speaking at once.

"The reporters," said Sirius tersely.

"I'll go see what's going on," said the doctor, who looked thrilled at an excuse to get away from Snape and Sirius for a bit. He scampered off, still clutching his clipboard.

Snape took no notice of his departure. He had rolled his voluminous sleeves back, and was bending over Dumbledore, holding the flask. He leaned forward and put one hand on Dumbledore's shoulder - a curiously gentle gesture, Lupin thought - then proceeded to pour the contents of the flask into Dumbledore's unresponsive mouth.

Sirius' shoulder jerked under Lupin's grip. "What are you *doing*?"  
Snape sat back, clutching the now-empty flask and staring at Dumbledore's limp form with wide, glittering eyes. "Just wait."

Lupin stared. For a moment, there was nothing - then he saw the tension in Snape's shoulders suddenly sharpen, heard Sirius at his side give a little gasp of astonishment. For Dumbledore's body was moving, his hands tightening into fists, his back arching up. A gray plume of smoke suddenly burst from his chest and rose upwards, trailing threads of silvery dust. Instead of dissipating, the smoke began to coalesce and harden. It began to sculpt itself into a shape. Lupin saw eyes forming, a nose, a mouth, a stream of silvery hair, a pair of half-transparent spectacles. The ghostly form of Dumbledore's head, his shoulders. It rotated slightly to face them and Lupin, speechless with astonishment, saw the half-transparent mouth smile.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, looking down at him. "Sirius. And Remus. You are all here."

Snape glanced sideways at Sirius and Lupin's poleaxed expressions,

and a faint smile flickered at the corner of his mouth. "We're here, Headmaster. But we haven't got much time."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Then let us begin."

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Narcissa put a hand to her mouth. "Your parents," she said, turning to Ron and Ginny, who both looked as if they'd been shocked with electricity. Hermione could have sworn that Ron's hair was standing up with alarm. "Mum and Dad?" breathed Ginny, looking both startled and horrified. "Oh, I bet they're just going to murder us."

Anton the ghost looked worried.

"There will be no murders here," said Narcissa briskly, and made a shooing gesture towards Anton. "Anton, go and tell them we're on our way. Ron and Ginny, come with me. Harry and Hermione, you wait here."

"No," said Harry, quickly, "I'll come with -"

"You'll wait here," said Narcissa in a voice like iron bands. Looking extremely imperious, she swept her robes around her, and started out of the room, shooing Ron and Ginny before her like ducklings. As she passed Hermione, she reached a hand out from one voluminous sleeve and pressed something into Hermione's grasp. Hermione looked up in quick surprise, saw Narcissa give her a half-smile, and then she and the Weasleys were gone and Hermione was alone in the room with Harry.

She looked up at him and saw that he was standing with one hand on the desk. He seemed to be carefully examining one of the books she and Ron had been reading earlier, although she did note that he was holding it upside-down. Not sure whether she should speak to him or not, she glanced down at the object Narcissa had put into her hand.

It was the letter from Snape.

Hermione sat down hurriedly in a nearby armchair and stared at it. It was a roll of heavy cream-colored paper, tied with a green and silver ribbon. "Harry," she croaked, and held it up where he could see it. "It's the letter from Snape - about the potion."

Harry put the book down with a clunk but didn't move. "So open it," he said, expressionless.

Slowly, she pulled the ribbon free and unrolled the letter, scanning the page filled with Snape's familiar, cramped handwriting. She read it once, then again, wide-eyed.

Then she held it out for Harry to take.

He came around the desk slowly and plucked it out of her hand, then retreated to the distance of several feet before he opened it and read it. She watched as his eyes scanned the page, knowing what he was reading there:

*Mr. Malfoy -*

*Consider me impressed that you have chosen to spend your summer holidays researching obscure potions and their counterspells. That said, I suggest you find some other potion to do your research project on. I recognize the potion in question from your description, although am baffled as to where you may have encountered a reference to it. It is a very old recipe and quite illegal; I have found reference to it in my own materials as being called the Imperious Potion, or alternatively the Omnia Vincit Charm - from the Latin for the expression that love conquers all.*

*As for reversals or counterspells there are none outside of the death or either the subject or the object of the induced affection. Ergo my advice that you find some other potion for your project. Contact me if you would like help with a list.*

*Cordially,*

*Professor Severus Snape*

Harry finished reading in silence, raised his head, and blinked.  
"That's it, then," he said in a colorless sort of voice.

In an uncharacteristically violent gesture, he crumpled the paper in his fist and threw it into the empty fireplace. Then he turned around. She could see the tension in his shoulders as he walked across the room and stopped at the bookcase -less as if he wanted to be there than as if he simply had lost interest in continuing his progress across the room.

He was standing underneath the stained-glass window, which threw a rich pattern of blue and green squares across his face and his white shirt. He looked up and looked at her and she could see the unhappiness in his face - Harry, who had always been such a naturally happy person.

*It's my fault*, she thought grimly.

Hermione got to her feet, although she didn't move towards Harry.  
"That's not it," she said, her own voice sounding thin to her ears.  
"Harry, just because Snape says there isn't any way of taking it off, doesn't mean it's true. He's only saying what he knows, and he doesn't know everything. I'm sure there's a way. There has to be."

"Not every problem has a solution, Hermione," he said, his quiet tone undercutting the anger in his voice. "I know that might be hard for you to believe."

"I don't see why I should believe it. I don't see any point in just giving up."

But Harry didn't seem to be listening. He was staring at a vague point above her head. "I miss you," he said, apropos of nothing. "I already miss you and it's only been a few hours. I keep thinking, how much am I going to miss you tomorrow, and the day after that and the day after that? Because I don't think it's going to get any better. I think there are some things that just don't get any better

and that this is one of them."

"Harry-" she began, starting towards him.

He held out a hand to ward her off. "Don't make it worse than it is."

"At least let me explain," she said, so quickly that the words nearly tumbled over themselves. "Let me explain and apologize and that's the last thing I'll ask you for, I swear."

"I don't want an apology. I want to *know*."

"Whatever you want to know, I'll tell you," she said, and meant it.

"Why did you bother pretending?" he nearly shouted. "When I saw you - outside the tower - that first time why did you pretend you were happy to see me? Why bother? What was the point? I can understand you not telling me the truth about the potion. But why the performance? I kissed you and that wasn't just me kissing you. You kissed me back. I couldn't even tell -" He broke off, and looked away again. "I couldn't even tell any difference."

Hermione gazed at him in astonishment. *Of course*, she thought, *he doesn't know* -

"You think the potion means I don't love you any more?" she said.

He didn't answer, just continued to look away from her.

"Harry, that's the last thing it means. My feelings about you haven't changed at all, and if I didn't love you so much I wouldn't have lied to you - I know that sounds stupid but it's true. I couldn't stand the thought of hurting you-"

She broke off, knowing how she sounded - the right words seemed to be escaping her, as so many things had escaped her lately. She knew it was the effect of the potion- that it hadn't just given her feelings she didn't want, but was draining away from her the very qualities that would allow her to fight those feelings - will, clarity,

strength of purpose. It was gradual, but it was happening; she could feel it.

"I'm not lying," she whispered, but Harry's expression didn't change, and she thought, despairingly: *He'll never believe anything I tell him, not now, not after this, and why should he?*

"Harry, come here," she said.

At last, he looked up, and when she saw the expression on his face, she nearly wished he hadn't.

"Come here," she said, again. "Please."

Moving reluctantly, he crossed the room and stood in front of her, looking defiant. His chin was set, his green eyes unreadable. She reached out and took hold of his right wrist and drew his hand towards her, placing it on her chest just over her heart. "I need you to believe me," she said. "Do what you have to."

For a moment, he looked uncomprehending. Then understanding flashed across his face and his eyes widened as he drew back, trying to withdraw his hand.

But Hermione hung on tightly. "Please," she said. "Or I'll do it myself."

He raised his eyes until they met hers, and she saw something crumble away behind his eyes, temporary resolve giving way to curiosity and the need to know the truth.

"*Veritas*," he said.

She felt a soft implosion inside her chest, and sucked in her breath. It hurt, but not as badly as she had thought it would, remembering the agony in Draco's eyes when she had put the spell on him. But then, he had fought it, and she wasn't fighting it. She shut her eyes, pressing herself back against the desk, letting the pain run through her like silver wires.



"Ask me, Harry," she said.

She heard the hesitation in his voice. "Do you love me?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes."

She saw a little of the tension leave his shoulders, although the questions didn't leave his eyes.

"Ask me if I'm in love with you," she said.

"Are you in love with me?"

"Yes. Completely."

Harry glanced down quickly, hiding his expression. "Okay, then," he said, in a slightly constricted voice, and cleared his throat. "Are you in love with Malfoy?"

Hermione gripped the edge of the desk with her hands. "Yes."

He didn't wince or change expression, but then it wasn't anything he hadn't already known. "But it isn't the same?"

"No. It's different. It's not real. I can tell. It doesn't mean I don't feel it."

"Do you really think there's a counterspell?"

"Yes," she said, hearing her own voice with some astonishment. "Yes, I really do."

Harry moved a step closer to her, not taking his hand away from its resting place above her heart. She could herself reflected in the pupils of his eyes, saw the lingering shadows there. "Ask me something else," she said, desperate to find whatever it was that would reassure him completely. "Ask me whatever, I don't care."

Harry ducked his head. She could almost have sworn she saw him

smile, briefly-

"Anything?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Do those new dress robes that Sirius got me make me look like a girl?"

"*What?*" This was the last question Hermione had expected him to ask, but then the spell didn't discriminate between significant and insignificant truths. "No. You look really cute in them," she said, and nearly smiled to hear the words coming out of her mouth. "See! I told you so."

"All right, then. Did you really like that present I got you for Christmas last?"

"No," said Hermione, and turned bright red. "I mean to say -" But it was useless. "You got me socks, Harry. Girls don't want socks! House-elves want socks! I know we weren't going out then, but *really*."

Harry made a muffled sort of noise. "I'll keep that in mind," he said. "Now. Do you really find watching me play Quidditch interesting or do you only come to the games to make sure I don't get killed?"

"I only come to the games to make sure you don't get killed," said Hermione, and groaned. "I think Quidditch is the most boring thing in the entire world, worse than watching paint dry. Harry, *stop*."

"You said I could ask you anything. So, are you in love with Ron?"

Hermione stared. "Harry! What? No!"

"Are you in love with Viktor Krum?"

"Not remotely. Where are you going with this?"

"Professor Snape?"

"Oh, this is getting disgusting. No."

"Professor Lupin?"

"You're deranged. No!"

"Sirius?"

Hermione looked solemn. "Well, he is awfully sexy."

Harry looked horrified. "*Hermione!*"

She suddenly giggled, unable to help it. "Don't ask if you don't want to know the answer!"

Harry grinned. A real grin, the like of which she hadn't seen on his face in she didn't know how long. At that moment, she would have told him anything, even if she hadn't been under the Veritas curse. "So," he said. "Since we're on the topic of romance, I think you should tell me exactly why you find me so devastatingly attractive. Take as long as you like and feel free to use big words."

"Oh, *no*, that's not fair," she protested, feeling her face burning.

"Come on, answer the question. Why do you love me?"

Hermione felt the words spilling out of her mouth uncontrollably. "I love you because-"

And then Harry's hand was over her mouth. She heard him say "*Finite incantatum*," and felt the pain behind her ribcage vanish. She glanced up and saw Harry looking down at her, not smiling any more, but not angry either. "I'm sorry," he said, taking his hand away from her mouth. "That was unfair."

"I deserved it," she said. "And a lot more than that."

"Did it hurt?"

She set her jaw. "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except that you

believe me. Do you believe me?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I do, I actually do." He reached out and pulled her towards him, wrapping his arms around her and resting his chin on top of her head. She could smell the familiar smell of soap, and the cold night air caught in his clothes. "As long as you really think there's a counterspell..."

She tilted her chin up and looked at him determinedly. "I have to."

"I know."

"Harry, I..."

But she couldn't find the words to express what she wanted to say, the importance and the seriousness of how very much she loved him. So she reached up and put her hands on his shoulders, pulled him towards her and kissed him - tentatively at first, since she had rarely kissed him before, usually she waited to *be* kissed - and then with greater urgency, standing up on tip-toe to get as close to him as possible. She felt his hands slide down to her waist, and then he had lifted her up and she was sitting on the desk and he was kissing her back, kissing her so hard it almost hurt. She felt him push her back until she was nearly lying down on the desk, felt his hands slide up to work the buttons free on her cardigan sweater --

*Crash!*

Hermione jumped at the sudden explosive shattering noise, nearly falling off the desk in her astonishment. "What was that?" she breathed against Harry's shoulder. "Was that some kind of ... Magid thing?"

She felt Harry laugh softly. "Not exactly," he said, propping himself up on his elbows and looking down at her. "You knocked a paperweight off the desk."

"Oh," said Hermione, turning pink. "I guess I got a little overenthusiastic. Sorry."

"I have that effect on women," said Harry, looking modest.

"You certainly have that effect on me."

Harry blushed. That was the difference between him and Draco, Hermione thought, not critically, but with interest. Draco wouldn't have blushed.

"That wasn't even my best effort," Harry said.

"Is that a fact," replied Hermione. She reached out and gently removed his glasses, placing them carefully on the side of the desk. Then she hooked her arm around the back of his neck and pulled him down to her. "Let's see your best effort, then, shall we?"

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Narcissa shut the door of the library hurriedly and turned to face the Weasley parents, Ron, and Ginny, who were all looking at her with polite curiosity.

"Er," she said. "I think it's best if we come back in a bit."

"Is Harry not there?" asked Mrs. Weasley, pink with motherly concern. "I wanted to see him -"

"They're talking," said Narcissa, stepping away from the doorway and starting to walk down the hall. "Best to give them a bit of privacy." She glanced back and saw the Weasley parents following her, looking curious. "They had a bit of an argument," Narcissa explained. "You know how teenage couples are. They fight, they make up - best to let them talk it over and we can come back later and see how they've made out."

She heard a snort of laughter from behind them that was most likely Ron, and felt her cheeks turn pink. *Oh, dear*, she thought. *That didn't come out right at all.*

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"How long do we have?" the smoky form of Dumbledore asked Snape, looking politely curious.

"The potion should allow you to speak with us for about ten minutes," said Snape tersely. "Maybe a few more than that. And it can only be used once."

Sirius could have sworn he saw Dumbledore's eyes twinkle. "Then we had better get started."

"Headmaster," Sirius asked, urgently. "Do you know who attacked you?"

"A very powerful dark wizard," said Dumbledore. "Not, I suspect, Voldemort."

"Do you think it was Slytherin?" asked Sirius, conscious of the incredulous look that Snape darted towards him, and the even more incredulous look on his face when Dumbledore said:

"It could well have been. So little is factually known about Slytherin, it is hard to say. Our assailant was hooded, disguised as a Dementor. He was certainly very powerful, although I do believe I could have held him off if it had not been for Cornelius trying to play the hero." Dumbledore's voice was regretful. "Poor Cornelius."

"He was a fool," hissed Snape. "And he nearly got you killed, Headmaster."

"Now, Severus," said Dumbledore admonishingly, and Snape subsided. "I did not see the wizard's face," Dumbledore continued. "Not that it would matter, since he is surely capable of disguising himself, and besides, no one but Draco or Hermione would recognize him, am I correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Snape was looking from Dumbledore to Sirius with a bright bitter

light in his eyes. "I suppose it would be a waste of time for me to ask what this is about."

"Salazar Slytherin has returned," said Dumbledore simply. "That is all we really know for certain. There is also the matter of an enchanted sword. One of the only four Living Blades ever forged. Two have been destroyed. One is in my office, in an adamantine case. The other is in the possession of young Master Malfoy. I cannot emphasize to you how significant that is."

Snape blinked in astonishment. "Draco Malfoy?" he echoed.

The door of the room opened, and Dr. Branford stuck his head in. His eyes widened when he saw the floating form of Dumbledore above the bed, but he held his ground. "Professor Snape," he said nervously. "Something's happened - could you come out here for a moment?"

Snape looked outraged. "Can't it *wait*?"

"Well," said the doctor. "No, actually."

"It's perfectly all right," said Dumbledore. "Leave us, Severus. You have done what you came here to do."

Looking mad enough to spit nails, Snape swept out of the room after the doctor. Lupin was not sorry to see him go. The moment he was gone, Sirius turned to Dumbledore. "Draco's missing," he said.

Dumbledore looked grave. "I rather thought he might be," he said.

"Do you think he's all right?"

"I really don't know." Dumbledore still sounded grave. "He's a strong boy, as strong as Harry is, and powerful in his own right. But that sword is one of the most powerful magical objects ever created. And we do not know its true purpose."

"Well," said Lupin. "It's a tool of Slytherin's, isn't it? It does his bidding?"

"These are the questions to which I do not have the answer. I was rather hoping that young Master Malfoy could give them to me. Is the sword a tool of Slytherin's, or an enemy of his? Is he working through it, or are the two opposed, battling each other?"

"But the sword brought Slytherin back to life," pointed out Lupin.

"Yes. But perhaps not as a reward. Perhaps as a punishment. He owes a great debt to the forces that made that sword what it is. If he was brought back, it could be to pay that debt."

"And he doesn't want to pay it?" asked Sirius.

"Not," said Dumbledore, "if he can have Draco pay in his stead. All he has to do is sit back and let the sword do its work."

Lupin narrowed his eyes. "What *is* its work?"

"The sword was made to fulfill wishes. That is what it does, that is the power that made it so coveted by Slytherin in the first place. It has been trying to show Draco that he can give him everything he's ever wanted. To succeed where Harry fails. Requited love, via the potion -"

"But it was all an accident," interrupted Lupin. "He just happened to be there; she just happened to see him -"

"There are forces at work here that I do not comprehend fully, if at all," said Dumbledore. "I would imagine that the sword, with its connection to Slytherin, knew about the love potion and contrived to place Draco there at that moment. Certainly there were many factors to take into account and the situation could have gone either way. And I may be wrong about the sword trying to fulfill his wishes with the love potion and its results. Perhaps it was simply trying to torment him. Perhaps it simply found the situation amusing. The sword is a demon, after all. It has a sense of humor, although not one most of us would share."

"She loves him now," said Sirius slowly. "But I wouldn't say that that's made him happy, exactly."



"What we think we want is not always what he really do want," said Dumbledore. "And remember, the intelligence that is trying to fulfill his wishes is a malign one. It sees that he wants Hermione to love him-presto, she loves him It would never grasp that there is more to the wish than the outward appearance of devotion, never grasp why induced love is not and cannot be satisfactory."

"What does the sword want?"

"A life," said Dumbledore simply. "What it was cheated of when Slytherin performed the magic that made him immortal. Specifically, the life of a Magid. Even more specifically, the life of a Magid with Slytherin blood. That was the original bargain. If the sword cannot have the life of Slytherin himself, it will take the life of one his descendants."

"Draco's life," said Sirius, looking pale.

"Not necessarily Draco," said Dumbledore, looking very grave. "It could just as well be Harry."

Sirius goggled at him. "Harry? But *Harry* is the heir of *Gryffindor*."

"Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin were cousins," said Dumbledore, sounding very calm. *All very well for him to be calm*, thought Sirius irrationally. *He's not even really here*. "Harry's blood will do just as well as Draco's to fill the bargain."

Lupin suddenly leaped to his feet and began pacing. "That explains so many things," he said, excitedly.

"Does it?" said Sirius, hoping he didn't look quite as blank as he felt. All this talk of Harry's blood and Harry's life was beginning to make him feel panicky, and he was rarely at his best when he was panicked. He fought down the feeling, and looked over at Lupin. "What does that explain?"

"I've been puzzling over what re-animated the sword in the first place, what brought it back to life, so to speak. The prophecy states

that the sword must be wielded by a descendant of Slytherin for its power to return, but you told me that Draco had never used it, just carried it around. But *Harry* used the sword; Harry attacked Lucius Malfoy with it. Drew his blood."

"Correct," said Dumbledore.

"Then why didn't the sword just stick with Harry?" asked Sirius, hoping the question made sense. "Why does it seem to have attached itself to Draco?"

"It would attach itself to whichever of them seemed easier to manipulate," said Dumbledore. "The sword is in the business of fulfilling wishes. What does Harry have to wish for? Certainly he might want his parents back, but the sword can't raise the dead. Draco's wishes, though. Much simpler. Makes him easier to control."

"So, Harry, is Harry in danger as well as Draco?"

Dumbledore looked grave. "He's in danger *from* Draco. If Draco has, as, you say, run off, I would imagine he did it to some extent to protect Harry. He must know what is wanted of him."

Sirius' jaw dropped. "You can't mean that he was afraid he might *kill* Harry?"

Dumbledore just looked at him. Translucent though he was, his gaze was still piercing.

Sirius swore.

"He did say he couldn't promise us he wasn't dangerous," said Lupin softly.

"We have to find him," said Sirius.

"I agree," said Dumbledore quietly. "It is imperative."

Lupin cleared his throat. "I believe that the sword allows him to cloak his location to some degree. I would try a Locating Charm, but I'm fairly sure it wouldn't work."

"No," said Dumbledore. His voice sounded faint. Glancing up, Sirius saw that his form had begun to blur around the edges. "No, that would accomplish nothing. And he's taken the Epicyclical Charm with him, hasn't he? A very thorough young man---" Dumbledore's voice suddenly wavered and grew inaudible, as if it were being choked off in mist. He seemed to be growing even more transparent - Sirius thought he could see the stones in the opposite wall through the Headmaster's wavering form. *We're losing him.*

Sirius leaned forward, gripping the arms of his chair. "*Professor--*"

For a moment, the wavering outline of the Headmaster grew clearer. "Harry," he said. "Harry can find him. They may chosen to shut down the connection that exists between them, but it is still there. Harry can reopen it, if he so chooses."

Sirius heard his own voice crack. "How can he do that?"

But when Dumbledore spoke again, his voice rippled like a voice heard underwater, unintelligible. Sirius fought back the urge to leap to his feet and reach out for the Headmaster's wavering form - he thought he saw Dumbledore look at him and wink, before the shards of mist that had held his form flew apart, dissolving into the air.

Sirius' eyes dropped to the still form of the man on the bed, whose chest still rose and fell with his quiet breathing. He felt Lupin's hand on his shoulder again, in sympathy rather than restraint this time. "I haven't the faintest idea what to do, Moony," Sirius said quietly. "Tell me what to do."

"I suppose the first thing we should do is talk to Harry. He needs to know what's going on. If he wants to help us find someone who may or may not be impelled to kill him - and I know you're going to say it isn't Draco's fault, I realize that's true, but there it is - I just think it should Harry's decision. Don't you agree?"

Sirius didn't reply. "Do you think the Ministry should be alerted that Draco's missing?"

Lupin hesitated. Sirius knew he harbored a healthy distrust for the Ministry and its beaurocrats, who up until 1950 had had a "kill first, ask questions later" policy when it came to werewolves. "I'd rather see if Harry can locate him first."

They both turned as the door opened, admitting Snape. Sirius felt the familiar uncontrolled lurch of dislike in his stomach that he always felt upon seeing him. Snape seemed unsurprised that Dumbledore was gone; he approached the bedside table and began sweeping the belongings he had left there - mortar, pestle, flask - into his pockets.

Sirius glanced up, a quizzical look on his face. "It's awfully quiet all of a sudden," he said.

Lupin cleared his throat, looking at Snape. It sounds as if the reporters are gone," he said. "Did you, er, get rid of them?"

The Potions master shook his greasy head. "No. I didn't. They found a more interesting story down the hall."

Lupin blinked. "A more interesting story....?"

Snape straightened up and gave them both a sallow smile. "Down the hall is the wing that houses the criminally insane. As of this morning, it houses one less of them."

Sirius looked at him blankly.

"Lucius Malfoy is dead," said Snape. "Murdered in his cell."

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"Bugger off and quit following me, Black."

Sirius was stalking down the corridor towards the wing of St. Mungo's that housed the criminally insane. Snape was by his side, the banked fire in his beetle-black eyes betraying his fury. He spun around, walking backwards, glaring at Sirius with undiluted hatred:

"Go home. This is Ministry business."

Sirius shook his head, still walking: "I'm not going home. I'm going to see what happened to Lucius Malfoy. I've got a right."

"You've got *no* right. The guards will never let you in. Lucius Malfoy's death is no concern of yours."

"It *is* my concern!" Sirius felt the fury boil up inside his chest. "He's my son's father. I mean, my *stepson's* father. Look, it really isn't any business of yours, you goat-faced, weasel-footed tosser. Why don't you just bugger off back to whatever hellhole you crawled out of?"

They were nearing the end of the hallway, now; Sirius could see a tight knot of Ministry Wizards standing in front of a numbered cell door. Snape glanced at them, then coldly at Sirius. "I am here representing the Ministry. Looking into Lucius Malfoy's death is part of my job here. You, on the other hand, are merely a blot on the landscape, contributing nothing."

Sirius wasn't sure at what point he had lost his temper, but it was definitely gone. "As an Auror, I've a hell of a lot more place here than you. Why don't you can just go on home to the Potions dungeon and get back to unfairly punishing little boys because you get such a kick out of it, that seems to be what you're good at."

"I do not get a kick out of it. I am a teacher. I do my job."

"How fortunate for you that your job is also your hobby."

Snape sneered viciously. "I'd just like to tell you that those twelve years you spent in Azkaban were the best years of my life. Every morning I woke up with a smile on my face and a song in my heart just knowing you were in there."

"What song would that be? "I May Be A Weasel-Faced Tossler But I've Got An Enormous Broom Shoved Up My-"

"Fuck you, Black."

"Look, Snape. I beat you up at school and I'd be more than happy to do it again. If you even think about trying to prevent me from going in to that cell, if you tell those guards to keep me out, I will rip out your windpipe and garrotte you to death with it. And I don't care if they send me back to Azkaban, because it would be worth it. Got that?"

Snape looked at him, and Sirius was disconcerted to see the beginnings of a cold smile on his face. "Fine," he said. "I hope you like what you're going to see."

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Upon Apparating himself into the library at Malfoy Manor, a rather unexpected sight met Lupin's eyes.

"*Good* God," he swore, involuntarily.

With a startled exclamation and a rather loud thump, Harry and Hermione fell off Lucius' desk and disappeared from view, much to Lupin's relief.

A moment later, Harry popped up from behind the desk, straightening his shirt and rather pink in the face. He felt around the desk for his glasses, put them on, and looked guiltily at Lupin. "Er, hello, Professor," he said. "We weren't expecting-"

"Yes, well that was rather obvious," said Lupin.

Hermione popped up next to Harry, buttoning her cardigan, her cheeks scarlet. "Professor, hello, how are you?"

"Fine, except that I nearly splinched myself," said Lupin gravely, trying to not grin at their guilty expressions. "Thanks to you."

"We were just kissing," said Harry, looking slightly defensive.

Lupin relented. "Yes, and I'm very happy to see that you're back on good terms. Although that desk is none too sturdy. Do try not to

hurt yourselves. In the meantime, I need to speak with Narcissa, so if you'll excuse me-

"Professor, *wait*," interrupted Hermione, nervously pushing her hair back behind her ears. "Can you stay for a minute?"

"Right!" said Harry, then blinked and looked confused. "I mean, no. Don't stay! Wait, I don't mean that either, I mean..."

"Do stop gibbering, Harry," said Lupin, not unkindly, and turned to Hermione, who, still very pink about the ears, was rummaging through the books stacked on the desk. "It's all right, Hermione, I don't want to intrude."

"Oh, it's all right," said Hermione, coming around the desk. Lupin saw she was holding the centaurs' book in her hands. She walked up to Harry and handed it to him. "Look at that, Harry."

Harry looked at it. "It's a book."

"Yes," said Hermione, with a tinge of impatience in her voice.

"So?"

"So, what language is it in?"

"You didn't tell me you wanted me to make with the reading." Harry opened the book, flipped through it at random, and shrugged. "It's in English."

Lupin jumped. "It's what?"

Harry gave him an odd look. "It's in English."

Lupin didn't know whether to splutter or shout. He nearly raced over to Harry, came around behind him, and stared over his shoulder at the pages, seeing the same incomprehensible squiggles and curlicues that he remembered. He jabbed a finger at the page. "Read me that bit, Harry," he said.

Harry gave him a look that clearly said, "Right, you're off your onion, aren't you, but I'm going to indulge you anyway because you seem basically harmless otherwise." Lupin endured it, keeping his finger firmly on the page while Harry read:

*Saturday, the Fourteenth of October. Drank too much last night. Woke up with dreadful headache only to find blasted Godric stomping about yelling again. God he just never stops yelling. Its great for terrifying the peasantry but not at all pleasant if you're just trying to enjoy your breakfast. Then at the meeting today he took issue with my request that we keep the school closed to all non-pureblooded students. Wouldn't listen to a single one of my arguments. Every time I make a decision on my own, Godric throws a wobbly. Detestable git. And he sat too close to Rowena at dinner again. If he keeps this up--*

Harry broke off and looked up at Lupin. "What on earth is this? What's it going on about?"

Lupin indicated with a jerk of his chin that Harry should keep reading. Harry flipped a few pages forward and read:

*Told Godric this morning in confidence that I was thinking of selling my soul to gain power over the entire wizarding world. He said, "I don't think that's such a good idea, Sly." I told him I thought it was a very good plan, flawless in fact, whereupon he lost his temper and called me a sad short bastard. I really don't understand what Rowena sees in him.*

*I'm very much looking forward to killing him.*

Harry broke off again, and stared at Lupin with round eyes. "Is this Salazar Slytherin's *diary*?"

"Well," said Lupin, "as a professional historian and academic, I'd have to say that I need to run tests to determine that, perhaps a



Verificarum spell, but, well...." He trailed off, then smiled at Harry and Hermione, sure that the relief in his eyes was plain. "It certainly looks like it."

"Well he certainly sounds a sad sort of laughable prat, doesn't he?" said Harry, staring at the book in disbelief.

Lupin shrugged. "It's very hard to tell what motivates people to do the things they do," he said diplomatically.

"When you look at this book," asked Harry, stabbing a finger at the page, "it doesn't look like English to you?"

"It isn't English, Harry," said Hermione, looking ever so slightly prim. "It's Parseltongue."

Lupin smiled at her. " It didn't even occur to me it might be a written language. It probably isn't, in fact, but the book could easily have been enchanted so that only a Parselmouth could read it. Very good Hermione, very good indeed."

Hermione beamed as if she'd just been given full marks in an exam, while Harry, struck by a sudden thought, frowned violently.

"Does this mean I'm going to have to read the whole book to you out *loud*?" he exclaimed, staring at Lupin in dismay. "Bollocks to *that*!"

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*If someone had told me this morning, thought Sirius grimly to himself, that at midnight I'd be standing in a lunatic asylum with Severus Snape, trying to piece together mangled bits of Lucius Malfoy, I'd have hit them over the head and called them a daft bugger.*

*Shows what I know.*

The Ministry guards had been surprisingly willing - in fact, more than willing - to let Sirius and Snape into the cell to view what remained of Lucius Malfoy. Partly it had been Sirius' recognizability and reputation as a top-flight Auror; partly it had been Snape's Ministry status, and partly it had been the fact that nobody else wanted to go in there.

It was easy to see why. On walking into the room, Sirius, who had seen quite a few nasty things during his tenure as an Auror, nearly felt his legs give out. There was no body - or at least, nothing remained of Lucius Malfoy that could accurately be *termed* a body. Blood drenched the furniture, splattered the walls, made viscous pools on the floor. The thin circle Lucius had drawn on the floor using blood gnawed from his wrist was nearly obscured by long streaks of blood and flesh, and there were also other - things - lying scattered around the room, mixed in with the blood and the white bits of bone: things Sirius didn't want to look at closely. Things that looked a lot like mangled limbs and organs.

"Well," said Sirius, feeling lightheaded. "I think we can rule out suicide."

"Not necessarily," said Snape, who hadn't so much as changed expression since they'd entered the cell.

"What, you think he got so depressed that he hacked himself into pieces?"

"Not exactly," said Snape coldly. He pointed towards one of the walls with his wand. "Have you looked at those?"

"Bloodstains," said Sirius. "So what?"

"I suppose it was optimistic of me to expect you to notice anything, Black. Look at the bloodstains. They look like -"

"*Writing*," said Sirius, twigging at last. He squinted at the wall. "Look, it continues on down to the floor."

"It appears to be some kind of runic language," said Snape, who had

taken out the notepad and the Quote-Quill and seemed to be copying down the writing. "They look like fire-letters," he muttered to himself. "The aftermath of a Summoning Spell, perhaps - I wonder what it was he was trying to summon? It's too bad this is so difficult to read--"

"Yes, if only he'd been a bit more careful while scrawling his dying message in his own blood."

"Don't try to be funny, Black. You're not amusing."

"I was *trying* to keep myself from being sick," said Sirius. "You're probably used to this sort of carnage from your days as a fun-loving Death Eater, but I-" he paused, suddenly, and looked at Snape. "You are, aren't you?" he said.

"I am what?"

"Used to this. You know what it is."

Snape looked at him with hooded eyes. "I do recall the Dark Lord visiting a rather impressive punishment upon those who disobeyed him," he said. "The Irruptus Curse. It -"

"Blows people apart," said Sirius, hollowly.

"Quite."

"And it's difficult to perform?"

"Very."

"Anything else to say on that topic?"

"Not really, no."

"Doesn't it just make you sick?"

Snape glanced up at him. "Excuse me?"

"To remember what you were," said Sirius harshly, and was gratified

to see Snape's expression tighten. "I know Dumbledore's told me you turned away from the Dark Lord, at great risk to yourself. He seems to put great stock in you. But I'll tell you, the rest of us don't. Without him to speak for you, who in the magical community is going to be able to summon up that much trust in a failed Death Eater who couldn't even keep faith with the Dark Lord?"

"Better a failed Death Eater," Snape said, "than a failed Secret-Keeper."

Sirius felt his stomach lurch and felt a sudden urge to hit Snape. He suppressed it. "You're just as much a murderer as I am," he said, his voice gritty.

Snape snapped his notebook shut. It and his quill disappeared into the sleeves of his robe as he walked towards the door, brushing by Sirius, who didn't move. At the door Snape turned and looked at him, his beetle-black eyes full of hate and something else as well.

"We are all guilty," he said. "We are *all* complicit."

He went out, and the door shut behind him.

Sirius, feeling sick and very nearly dizzy, passed the back of his hand across his eyes and swore softly. *Did I lose that argument?* he wondered. *Was that even an argument?* He heard Snape's voice in his head again, *failed Secret-Keeper*, it said. He pushed back thoughts of James and Lily, because that way was darkness, that way was the Pit and headaches that lasted for hours and hours. Already the coppery smell of blood was making him nauseated. He took a step backwards, and felt his foot come down on something that squished unpleasantly. Dear God, he thought to himself, glancing down - is that a *finger*?

Sirius fled.

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Ginny stared gloomily into the fire that leapt and sparkled in the grating. Even though it was June, it tended to be so cold in Malfoy

Manor that the warmth of the fire was far from unwelcome. Ron, sitting next to her with his arms crossed over his chest, was looking both thoughtful and slightly irritated.

"What do you think they're talking about?" he said.

Ginny knew immediately who he meant: their parents, who had retreated with Narcissa to another room for grown-up talk. Ron was more irritated about being left out of this conversation than Ginny was. Ginny had a cold fist of dread in her stomach that even the warmth of the fire didn't seem to be able to dispell. She kept seeing Draco in her mind's eye, standing in the garden, that terrible look of anguish on his face. *He didn't want to go. Why did he go?*

"I *said*," Ron repeated irritably, "what do you think they're talking about in there?"

Ginny looked at her brother blankly, still seeing Draco's face in her mind. "What?"

Ron shook his head. "I said I'm really enjoying it here on Earth. What's it like where you are?"

Ginny's felt her lip tremble. "I'm so worried, Ron," she said. "I think he's in real danger."

Ron looked blank. "What, Harry?" he asked, sounding ever so slightly irritable. "The only danger Harry's in is of suffocating to death from having Hermione attached to his face."

"*Not* Harry. Draco. I think he's in danger."

Ron looked as if he were fighting the urge to say "So what?"

"*Don't* say 'So what?'" added Ginny, darkly.

"I wasn't going to," lied Ron. "Look, Malfoy's got Sirius and Narcissa to look out for him. I'm sure they'll put all the resources of money and the Malfoy name and their Ministry connections into finding him."

"They won't find him. Not if he doesn't want to be found."

"Stop being cryptic. It's annoying. What do you care what happens to Malfoy, anyway?"

"Because-" began Ginny, and broke off.

Ron stared at her, his blue eyes suddenly widening. "Ginny," he said. "you're *not*. With Malfoy? What did I *tell* you-"

Ginny gave him a stubborn look. "It's none of your business, is it?"

Ron looked exasperated. "*What* is it with you and emotionally unavailable guys? First Harry, and that was bad enough. Now Malfoy, who is not just in love with somebody else, but is also moral garbage on legs. I suppose the best that can be said about him as a romantic prospect is that at least he isn't gay." Ron's eyebrows drew together thoughtfully. "That we know of," he added. "He does seem awfully fond of Harry."

Ginny made a growling noise. "You," she said coldly, "are the only one of us who still hates him."

"Of us? Who is us?"

"Well, Hermione-"

"Hermione's under a spell," said Ron, firmly.

"Harry likes him."

"Harry told me he doesn't consider Malfoy a friend," said Ron, which was true enough.

Ginny was taken aback, but recovered quickly. "Sirius," she said triumphantly. "Sirius likes him."

Ron looked solemn. "Sirius did a lot of drugs when he was our age."

"*Ron!*"

Ron grinned. "Okay, maybe not. But he definitely had a wild side, maybe that makes him identify with Malfoy. Dad did tell me that Sirius went to his Hogwarts graduation wearing nothing but a pair of orange-tinted swimming goggles and some leather motorcycle gloves."

Ginny was momentarily diverted from the topic of Draco. "Is that *true?*"

"I dunno, Harry and I went to try to check the old graduation pictures in the library, but that year is missing. I bet some girl stole it."

"Well, he still likes Draco," said Ginny firmly. "So there you go."

"Ginny," said Ron equally firmly. "You can do better than Malfoy. Okay?"

At which point Ginny did something she hadn't done in years, and, quite unprovoked, brought her foot down hard on Ron's toe.

"Yeow!" he yelled, jumping away and giving her an injured look. "What'd you do that for?"

"Can't you let him alone for just one second?" Ginny said, almost tearfully. "Can't you just think of one good thing about him?"

"Sure," said Ron. "Someday, he'll be dead." Seeing Ginny's furious expression, he sighed, reached out and took her hand. "Look, Ginny. I can't help it. I will admit that Malfoy really does seem to care about Hermione, and to some extent, that makes him human. But I just don't feel comfortable trusting him, and more than anything, I don't want you to get hurt. Understand?"

"I understand, but I'm not the one who's in danger of getting hurt at the moment," said Ginny in a small voice. "He is." She looked at her brother. "He *is* in danger, Ron. I can still feel Dark Magic, you know,

and I felt it coming off him the last time I saw him. Like cold waves. Not coming from him, but around him. There's something working on him, or through him - like me with that diary -"

She broke off as the door opened and their parents walked in. Molly and Arthur Weasley looked more than a little shell-shocked, and when Molly came forward to hug Ginny, it was with an unexpected intensity.

"What's going on, Mum?" asked Ginny, pulling away.

"Sirius just got back from the hospital," said Mr. Weasley.

Ron's eyes were wide. "Is Dumbledore all right?"

"He's in stable condition," said Mr. Weasley. "But Lucius Malfoy is dead."

Ginny's eyes widened. "Draco's father?" she whispered. "He's dead?"

"Murdered in his cell," said Mr. Weasley. "Extremely unpleasantly."

"I think it's time we go home," said Mrs. Weasley. "This is a time for the family and I can't help but feel we're intruding."

"Not to mention I need to get to the Ministry," added Mr. Weasley. "I've gotten several owls from Percy already...."

"We're leaving?" asked Ron, still wide-eyed. "But what about Harry? And Hermione?"

"This is Harry's home, love," said Mrs. Weasley firmly. "This is where he belongs and should stay. And I've already asked Hermione if she'd like to come back home with us, but she said she'd prefer to remain with Harry."

"Made up, then, have they?" asked Ron.

"Looks like it."

Ron looked over at Ginny. Ginny looked back at him mournfully.



"Can we go say goodbye to Harry and Hermione?" she asked.

Mrs. Weasley sighed. "You'll see them again soon enough, I'm sure," she said. "But go on and make your farewells. At this rate we won't be home before morning."

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The atmosphere in the library was gloomy. The Weasleys' departure had left Harry and Hermione looking stunned, as if they couldn't quite believe their friends were gone. Mrs. Weasley had had dozens of hugs for Harry and had extended invitations to both of them to come to the Burrow, but Harry had been adamant that he wanted to stay with Sirius, and Hermione had been adamant about staying with Harry, so that had been that and the two of them now sat holding hands behind the desk, looking, Lupin thought, like a painting of orphan children with big, sad eyes. Sirius had taken Narcissa into the drawing-room to talk to her about Lucius' death, as well as what Dumbledore had told them about Draco, and they had not yet returned.

Lupin, meanwhile was thumbing through the book that he had begun to think of as Slytherin's diary, although there was no proof yet that that was what it was. Now that he knew it was Parseltongue, he was fairly sure he would be able to manage a translation. It was the one bright spot amongst general gloom.

"Do you need help with the book, Professor?"

It was Harry asking. He looked tired and a bit lost and anxious.

"Thanks, Harry. I might in a bit. I'm just considering various translation spells. I've managed to get quite a few paragraphs into a readable form already."

Hermione glanced up. "Anything interesting?"

"No, mostly just complaints about Godric and, er, observations about Rowena. He's quite a complainer."

"Oh, I don't know," said Harry, rather unexpectedly. "I mean, it doesn't sound like Godric was all that nice to him. It sounds like he was always baiting him and tormenting him like - like Snape."

Lupin and Hermione looked at Harry in astonishment. "That reminds me," said Lupin, suddenly remembering. "Did you hear back from Snape about the love potion?"

Both Hermione and Harry flushed. "Yes, we did," said Hermione, a bit unwillingly. "He said there wasn't a reversal spell - that he knew of," she added hastily.

"Ah," said Lupin, although his heart sank. "Well, he doesn't know everything."

"He said it was curable only by death," added Harry.

"Well, most spells are," Lupin pointed out. "Even being a werewolf is curable by death. I'd hardly call it a terribly helpful point."

Hermione set her chin. "I think he was just trying to be discouraging."

"He does like to be contrary," said Lupin neutrally, although he privately disagreed. If there was one thing Snape wouldn't lie about, it was his beloved potions. "Right now," he said, wanting to change the subject, "it would be best if we concentrated on finding Draco, but once we've found him I'll be happy to write to the Potions masters at Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, perhaps they might be able to help."

"I was wondering, Professor," said Harry, suddenly. "If Narcissa kept anything of Draco's from when he was a baby - like hair, or any of his baby teeth, or anything - could we make another Epicyclical Charm and try to use that to find him?"

"It's a good idea, Harry. I suggested that to Sirius. But given Lucius' Dark Arts proclivities, he thought it was unlikely that Narcissa would have kept anything like that. Too easily turned against Draco. No, I believe we're going to have to go through other channels to

find him."

"Other channels?" echoed Hermione. "Like the Ministry?"

"No," said Lupin, wishing that Sirius would come back already and help him out with this conversation. "Actually, we were hoping you might be able to help us out with that, Harry."

Harry blinked. "What can I do?"

"Well, it's entirely up to you, Harry, but -"

The library door opened and Sirius came in, alone, without Narcissa. He looked over at Lupin; his eyes said, *have you told him yet?*

Lupin looked back. *Right in the middle of explaining. Care to help out?*

Sirius crossed the room and sat down on the desk, facing his godson. He looked at Harry intently. Without any preamble, he said, "Do you remember after you and Draco took the Polyjuice potion, how, to some extent, you knew what he was thinking?"

"Yeah," said Harry, raising his eyebrows.

"But that went away once the Potion came off, didn't it?" said Hermione, who as usual had twigged to the point that Sirius was trying to make before Harry had. "Didn't it?"

Now Harry looked slightly uncomfortable. "Well," he hedged. "Not exactly."

They all looked at him.

Harry took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. "Look," he said. "I don't know what Malfoy's thinking, if that's what you're asking. And I certainly don't know where he is. But I can sometimes tell what he's feeling and, er, sometimes I can tell what he's dreaming. Which lately has been all bad, I don't mind telling

you."

Hermione looked astounded. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I find it weird and disturbing. And because it's fading. It's less every day."

"But that can be reversed," said Sirius. He looked over at Lupin. "Can't it?"

Lupin looked thoughtful. "That connection you two had through the Polyjuice potion. It isn't a connection that's at all unheard of, historically. It is very similar to the connection one might find between a Magid and their Source. Whatever bonded you to each other; it hasn't been dissolved, merely shut down. You can open that channel back up, I believe. If you want to. It would be perfectly understandable if you didn't want to, because--"

"Because he's dangerous?" said Harry. "Yeah, I know he thinks he is."

"It's more than that, Harry," said Sirius. "He isn't just dangerous, he's dangerous specifically to you. You can locate him for us, but you can't go after him with us. We'll have to do that."

Harry looked blank. "Why?"

Sirius sighed, and explained. Harry's eyes grew wide, but he didn't look as surprised as Lupin had thought he would. "Slytherin blood," he said, finally, looking grave. "So that's why the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin."

"You're not a Slytherin, Harry," said Hermione firmly. "Whatever your...genetic inheritance might be."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry calmly.

Lupin looked at him sidelong, reflecting that Harry seemed, in a lot of ways, surprisingly confident for his age; he wondered if that was a recent development, and how much of it was traceable to his relationship with Hermione - which, ironically enough, seemed to be

the one thing he wasn't terribly confident about.

"I guess this is one of the downsides of being a Magid," Harry said. "I mean, the sword wouldn't have any interest in me if I wasn't one, would it?"

"There are always drawbacks to power," said Lupin. "It's a good thing to know."

"Don't listen to him about you being powerful," said Hermione, poking Harry in the side with her finger. "You've got a big enough head already."

Harry looked solemn. "Power? Ambition? The Jedi craves not these things."

Hermione giggled. Sirius and Lupin looked at him as if he were insane.

Harry forced his face back into a serious expression. "Never mind. Let's get started."

\*\*\*

It was nearly dawn when Severus Snape arrived home. He had been kept a long time at St. Mungo's, speaking with the mediwizards about Dumbledore's treatment, and an even longer time with his debriefing at the Ministry. He mounted the steps of his home slowly, seeing the clear red light of the rising sun chasing the darkness back above the trees in the distance. It was morning, and as it often did when he was very tired, the Dark Mark on his arm ached like a long-healed wound.

He felt something slightly off-kilter the moment he crossed the threshold. His house was still, dark, lightless, as he had left it - but there was something subtly *wrong*. He drew his wand out of his sleeve and moved quietly down the hall, his ears pricked for any noise.

Halfway down the hall, he heard a noise. But it wasn't any kind of

noise that he had expected.

It was *music*.

And it was coming from his own living room.

Curiosity and indignation overcame native caution, and Snape strode the rest of the way down the hall, not bothering to try to mask his footsteps. At the end of the hall, he swung to the left and threw the door open.

A bizarre sight met his eyes. The room was almost as he had left it - furnished with heavy wooden chairs, stiff and uncomfortable, the walls lined with books, the floor very dusty, any light that might have found its way in through the windows blocked by heavy canvas drapes. The only difference was that in the middle of the room, in the center of the small circular Persian rug of which he had always been rather fond, sat Draco Malfoy.

It took a moment for Snape to recognize his favorite student out of his black Hogwarts robes, dressed plainly in jeans and a t-shirt, both of which were a little too big on him. He looked calm and not the least bit startled to see Snape. He had one hand held out, and in the dimness of the room it took Snape a moment to decipher what he was doing - and then another moment for it to sink in. He held his hand palm up, and hovering a few inches above his fingers was a circular black disk - a record. It was spinning rapidly, as if on a turntable, and *music* was coming from it.

Snape couldn't help himself. He stared.

"Bach," said Draco, looking calmly up at Snape. "The Goldberg Variations. That's quite a collection of Muggle music you've got. I never would have guessed you were such a big Bay City Rollers fan."

Snape stared at his erstwhile student and shook his head. "Mr. Malfoy," he said coldly. "Would you like to tell me what you're doing here? Desperate to do more research into love potions, are you? Or were you simply curious about my record collection?"

Draco looked at him blankly for a moment, then smiled. There was something odd about that smile, Snape thought. It wasn't the smile of a teenage boy. It wasn't even Draco's usual nasty smile. It was something else again. "I thought maybe you could help me," he said simply.

Snape shook his head again. "Help you? Why would I want to help you? How did you get in here anyway?"

Draco smiled. "I can do a lot of things," he said, glancing up at the still-spinning record hovering above his hand. "A lot of things I never knew I could do. Like with this record, for instance." He looked sideways at Snape. "I cut through the lock on your front door. Then I repaired it. It's as good as it ever was. I didn't damage anything."

"That's not the point. The point is that you shouldn't be here. I can't imagine what you're doing here and I don't much care. You may be one of my own House students, but this is a bit much, as I'm sure you'll agree. I suggest you go home."

"I can't go home," said Draco, who appeared to have acquired the shamelessness of real desperation. "You have to help me."

"Why do you want *me* to help you?"

"Because," said Draco simply, "you won't tell Sirius Black where I am."

"Black was worried about you today," said Snape, not in a particularly kindly tone. "It strikes me that he and the rest of your family would be perfectly happy to help you. Why don't you go to them?"

"Because they don't understand," said Draco, scrambling up on to his knees. "They're all the same - Sirius, Harry, the rest of them - they're all good, they've always been good. They don't know any other way to be. To them evil is something to be despised and held at arm's length, not something that walks beside you every day and every night of your life. They don't know how to fight it because

they've never had to fight it. But *you* know," and when he looked up and Snape saw his face made younger by shock and exhaustion, he remembered suddenly the baby Draco had been, fifteen years ago when his father had brought him wrapped in blankets to Death Eater meetings, and even Voldemort had remarked upon the peculiar color of the boy's hair, the silver color of his eyes. *This one is marked for something special.* Not that *special*, Snape thought, as a term used by the Dark Lord, necessarily meant anything particularly good. "You were evil, but you came back," said Draco. "I thought you might understand. I thought you might tell me how you did it."

Snape looked at him. His favorite student, a boy he had always been rather fond of, for no reason he could decipher given that he detested Draco's father. But there it was. Perhaps it was because Draco reminded him of himself at that age, just as Harry reminded him of James. But perhaps that was all wishful thinking; Draco was really nothing like him at that age. *I wasn't a fighter*, he thought. *It took me years to learn that there might be anything in the world worth fighting for.*

Draco had fallen silent, watching the black circular disk spin lazily over his hand, a dark and slightly disquieting light in his eyes. He had a dreamy half-smile on his face, as if he were thinking of something else now, somewhere he would like to be. It was the same smile that would give Charlie Weasley nightmares, but it merely gave Snape pause for thought.

"Perhaps I can help you. But first there's something you should know."

"What?"

With brutal calm, Snape said, "Your father's dead. He died this evening."

Draco didn't move, but went suddenly, startlingly white. The dark light behind his eyes that had disquieted Snape seemed to crumble momentarily, leaving his eyes translucently clear, windows of shock



and loss. The spinning disk cracked in half with a sound like a broken bone, and the pieces rained down onto the carpet. Draco looked up at Snape, his face made childlike again with astonished desolation. "Are you *sure*?"

"I'm sure," said Snape, turning to leave the room. "Stay where you are, Mr. Malfoy. I'll get you some coffee."

## Chapter Eight - Demons and Angels

*There is a crack in everything;  
That's how the light gets in.*  
-Leonard Cohen

Draco poked at the food on his plate somewhat dispiritedly. It wasn't that the food wasn't good; to Draco's immense astonishment, Snape, amongst his other achievements, seemed to be able to produce a mean blueberry scone. But his stomach was tied in such tight knots that every bite was like swallowing a jagged chunk of metal.

It didn't help, of course, that Snape, sitting across from him at the table in the small, blue-painted kitchen, was staring at him with a piercing glare that Draco found very disconcerting. Draco had always thought that laceration by means of the eyes was a rather trite expression, but at the moment Snape's beetle-black gaze made him feel as if the Potions master could state right through his forehead to the back of his skull. "So," said Snape, crumbling a bit of scone absently between his forefingers, "now that we've been over this several times, I am still unclear. You came to me because you thought I could help you, or because you knew I wouldn't tell Sirius Black that you're here?"

"Well," said Draco around a mouthful of scone, "you won't, will you?"

"Considering that I wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire, that's an accurate assessment, yes. What do you care if he knows you're here?"

"He'll try to bring me home," said Draco, as if this was obvious. "He thinks he can help me, but he can't help me. None of them can help me. I still think you can, though."

Snape looked absently towards the little window set in the east wall.

Pale morning light streamed through the curtains. Draco looked away; he had discovered that lately, light hurt his eyes. "I don't mind not telling Sirius Black where you are. But it seems somehow immoral to keep the news of your whereabouts from your mother. Perhaps you should owl her and tell her why you don't feel you can go home?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "And say what? 'Lo, Mum, I can't come home because I think I'm going mad. Not just a little mad, but full-on banging-my-head-against-the-wall, frothing-at-the-mouth, homicidal-impulses barking. And by the way, send pocket money. Love, Draco.'"

"You're not going mad. Going mad would be a fairly simple issue to deal with. This is much more complicated. You are not an ordinary boy- "

"I know, thanks, my dad told me," said Draco, looking away. His mind didn't seem to be able to wrap itself around the idea that his father was dead, even though Snape had given him the details and shown him a copy of the Daily Prophet with a headline about Lucius' death. He wasn't sure what he felt - not grieved exactly, but certainly somewhat dazed. He remembered how blank Harry had looked after getting Hermione's letter back at school, remembered thinking that Harry was in shock. He rather hoped his shock would last longer than Harry's, as he was not looking forward to what might happen when it wore off.

Snape was looking thoughtful. "I admit that I'm surprised that your father told you of the Dark Lord's original plans for you."

"Why?"

"Because your father was a liar. He lied to everyone, even when there was no benefit in it to himself. He lied because he loved it. I'm surprised he told the truth to you."

Draco didn't quite know how to respond. However he might feel about his father, family pride precluded him from insulting him in the presence of strangers, or near-strangers. He recalled having once

told Harry that he hated Lucius, but that had been different because he'd been quite sure he was about to die at the time, and anyway, that had been Harry. Snape calling his father a liar was something else again. According to the Malfoy Family Code of Conduct (length: three hundred pages, containing 1,376 rules ranging from: "The Malfoy family dress robe colors are black, green and silver, except on state occasions when it is permissible to wear red, silver and black" to "Malfoys are expressly forbidden from practicing inappropriate Lust Charms on members of the animal kingdom, especially in the topiary garden; this means you, Uncle Hector") he should, to save the honor of his family, leap to his feet and hit Snape in the eye. But he didn't much feel like it, so he contented himself with glaring furiously at his half-empty teacup and muttering,

"Milk."

"What was that?"

"Milk," said Draco again. "For my tea. I need some."

"Get it yourself," said Snape shortly.

Draco got to his feet and padded over to the refrigerator. It looked like an ordinary enough fridge from the outside, but upon opening it he found that it was stocked with dozens of clear glass canisters, each one neatly labeled in Snape's crabbed, articulate handwriting; "Bat's blood", "salamander eyes", "dried mundwinkles", "lizard ears" and "tapioca pudding." The tapioca pudding looked a lot like the dried lizard ears. Draco shut the door hastily. "I didn't *really* want milk," he said, half to himself, and went back to the table.

Snape glared at him. "I thought you were getting milk."

"I decided I didn't want any."

"Well, I want some."

Draco, who was feeling dizzy and didn't really want to get up again, glared right back at him, and raised his left arm. The fridge door slammed open, the glass canister of milk flying out. It spun towards

Draco and smacked into his hand. He banged it down on the table and raised his eyes to see Snape glaring at him more than ever.

"Do *not* show off," the Potions master said coldly.

Draco opened his eyes wide. "Why not?"

*Bang!*

Snape brought his hand down on the table with a force that made the silverware rattle. "You think you get all that power for *free*?" he snarled. "Nothing is *free*. Every time you use it, you lose a little piece of your own soul."

Draco shrank back against the back of his chair. He felt...scolded, in a way he had never really felt scolded before, not even by Sirius. It broke through a little of the hazy fog surrounding his brain, and he blinked at Snape in astonishment. "But I-"

"Shut up," said Snape briskly, and got to his feet, pushing his chair back. "Sit here," he said. "Don't move. If you use any magic at all while I'm gone, even to lift the tea-strainer, I'll force-feed you a potion that'll turn you into a gerbil."

"First a ferret, now a gerbil," said Draco irritably. "Why does everyone look at me and think 'rodent?'"

"Do you really want an answer to the question?"

"No. Where are you going?" Draco realized he sounded plaintive, and didn't care. He didn't want to be left alone, he'd been alone all day and it was enough, especially with his brain feeling as if it was about to shake itself into pieces like an old car driven too fast.

"To my workroom," said Snape. "I need to get something."

"Let me come with you."

"You haven't eaten anything. I don't want you fainting all over the place. I have a lot of very fragile and valuable equipment in that

room."

Draco grabbed up a the remains of his scone and shoved it into his mouth, barely bothering to chew. "Mmpph," he said, making a broad and expansive gesture with his arms that indicated he was done eating.

Snape looked at him, and Draco could have sworn he saw a brief flicker of amusement tug at the corner of his sour mouth. "All right. Come along."

Snape's workroom turned out to be far more of a laboratory than a workroom. Draco suspected that he probably just called it a workroom because he didn't want to sound like a mad scientist. Nevertheless, the room would have done a mad scientist proud: it was high-ceilinged and dimly-lit, and everywhere there were cauldrons bubbling over low fires, tall glass beakers filled with substances that glowed, steamed and sizzled, labeled bags and packets filled with crushed herbs, beetle shells, shredded boomslang skin and other substances Draco couldn't have named. He walked from one table to another while Snape busied himself at a desk in the corner of the room, staring at the vials, flasks and clear philtres full of multicolored liquids.

"What does that one do?" asked Draco, gazing at a beaker full of a bubbling lime-green liquid.

"Gets rid of chest hair," said Snape.

"And that one?"

"Makes you grow chest hair all over your body."

"Ugh."

"Some people want strange things."

"Do you *sell* this stuff?"

"Sometimes," replied Snape. "You think anyone could live on the

salary they pay us at Hogwarts? Most of us do outside consulting work. Now sit down on that stool over there and shut up for a minute."

Draco obediently sat down on the stool, which was next to a long low desk piled with various bits and pieces of discarded junk. Rolls of twine, small jars of newts' eyes past their expiry date, snapped quills, a piece of broken mirror. It had been rather a long time since he'd even looked at his own reflection, Draco thought, reaching down to pick up the bit of broken mirror. That in itself was cause for alarm concerning his mental state.

He held the bit of broken glass up and looked at his own reflected image in a state bordering on dismay. *I look horrible*. His summer tan seemed to have disappeared, and his skin looked as white and semi-translucent as paper. He must have lost weight, too, he could see the sharp blades of his collarbones sticking up above the loose collar of Charlie's too-large shirt. In his white face, his eyes, always pale silvery-gray, looked nearly black, the irises thinned to slender bands of silver around his enlarged pupils. No wonder the light in the kitchen had hurt his eyes. The shadows under his eyes were bruise-blue, and his hair--

Draco suddenly yelled and dropped the mirror.

Snape, who had been investigating the contents of a desk drawer, straightened up and hurried over to Draco, careful not to spill the contents of the flask he was holding. He looked alarmed, or at last as alarmed as he ever looked. "What is it? What's going on?"

"I've got a white hair!" said Draco, grabbing a handful of silvery strands and glaring upwards at them. "I'm only sixteen and I've got a white hair!"

Snape's look of alarm quickly changed to a look of disgusted amusement. "With the hair you've got, I don't see how you can tell."

"Of course I can tell. What's happening to me? Am I dying? You have to help me. Give me something - anything -"

"A packet of hair dye?" suggested Snape with a cold smile. "Your vanity is impressive, Mr. Malfoy, but I think your coiffure is the least of your problems. Here. Drink this," and he shoved the flask he had been holding into Draco's right hand.

Draco glanced down. The flask was full of a thick-looking black liquid that bubbled and steamed and smelled vaguely like wet asphalt. "Er," he said. "And what's this when it's at home?"

The Potions master just looked at him. In the flickering light of the many fires in the workroom, Snape's face looked like a mask of itself, outlined in red shadows. It was odd, Draco thought, looking at him: Snape was the same age as Sirius, yet Sirius' face bore plainly the marks of the boy he had once been; Snape looked like someone who had never had a childhood. "Drink it," Snape said again. "It will help you."

Draco bit his lip. "Would you drink it," he said, glancing sideways at Snape, "if you were me?"

"I *have* drunk it. It's a preparation I made especially for my own personal use, many years ago."

Draco lowered the flask and stared. "Why?"

Snape sighed and leaned back against the wall, hunching his angular shoulders inside his black robes, his expression unreadable. Then he reached down and slowly pulled up his left sleeve. He held his arm out to Draco, palm up, so that Draco could clearly see the Dark Mark branded into his skin.

Draco stared, then raised his eyes to Snape. "Yes," he said slowly. "I know. My father has one. *Had* one," he corrected himself, hastily.

"This is not the only souvenir I ever carried of my association with the Dark Lord," said Snape, looking down at his own arm. "When we were his, we were tied to him, body, blood and brain. That's part of the reason nobody ever left his service. If he did not find you and kill you himself, madness was the usual and inevitable other result."



"But you left."

"I left. And I very nearly went mad. I took refuge with Dumbledore, and he protected me from bodily injury at the Dark Lord's hands. But he could not save my mind. Everywhere I went, every day, every hour, I heard the Dark Lord's voice in my head, promising that if I returned to his service, all would be forgiven. Dumbledore had made me part of his plans. The Dark Lord promised me that if I gave him news of those plans, he would give me clemency. His voice spoke in my ear every day, and all night in my dreams."

Draco stared at him, his mouth half-open. "Did you want to go back to him? Did you believe him?"

"Oh, yes, I wanted to. But no, I didn't believe his promised forgiveness. For that is the essence of cruelty like his; betray him, and no mercy will be shown to you."

"So what did you do?"

"I made *that*," said Snape shortly, pointing at the flask Draco held. "I had no idea at first if it would help me or if it would kill me. But I worked hard on it, and it was successful. It blocked the voices in my head and gave me my own will back. I can only hope it will do the same for you."

Draco looked back down at the potion, which was still swirling and bubbling.

"I added a Wakefulness Potion to the mixture," he heard Snape say, sounding very far away. "It will keep you from sleeping, and dreaming. At least for a few days."

Draco nodded. "Cheers," he muttered, and lifted the flask to his mouth. He tilted his head back and swallowed hard; despite its smell of asphalt, the potion really had very little taste. He felt it snake its way down the back of his throat, and hit his nearly-empty stomach, where it sizzled. A wave of heat struck him, nearly making him drop the flask, and then an alert and burning energy which swept over him like fever. It hurt, a little, but was also curiously warming, and he had been so cold the past few days...

"Oh," he said quietly, and leaned forward slowly until his head was resting on his folded arms on the desk. He felt Snape reach forward and pluck the flask out of his limp fingers. He suddenly missed Sirius, who would have put a hand on his shoulder, or stroked his hair, or something. He heard Snape's voice as if from very far away:

"Are you all right, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yeah." He sat up, rubbed at his eyes. "I'm fine."

"It might burn your throat a little, but it won't hurt you. It should take an hour or so for its full effect to be felt. Would you like to go lie down?"

"I'm not tired."

"No. You wouldn't be. The Wakefulness potion works immediately." Draco didn't say anything, just sat with the heels of his hands pressed against his eyes. He could feel the potion spreading its heat outward from his stomach, winding through his veins, making his heart pound wildly. He took a deep shuddering breath and heard Snape say: "Yes, I know it hurts. Breathe through it, the pain won't last."

"I am breathing," snapped Draco irritably. "Like I'm going to stop breathing."

"Well, you never know what the side effects will be," said Snape, and Draco cut his eyes sideways, wonder if the Potions teacher was making a joke. He couldn't tell. "Look," Snape added stiffly. "You'll be all right. You've obviously got a very strong will of your own, or you wouldn't have made it this far. You were meant to give in. And you haven't given in, despite injuries and exhaustion. You should be proud."

"Injuries?" murmured Draco, taking his hands away from his eyes. "I haven't got any injuries, I haven't even got a scratch on me."

Snape leaned forward and pressed his fingers to Draco's temples. To

Draco's surprise, he had no urge to pull away, despite the fact that he usually didn't much like being touched - the gesture was oddly fatherly. "I meant in here," said Snape, tapping Draco's left temple with a thin finger. "There are the war wounds of enchanters carried. I have them myself. You *are* fighting a battle, young Mr. Malfoy. Even if you don't quite know it yet."



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"I don't quite understand," said Mrs. Weasley, as she rejoined Ron and Ginny at the breakfast table, bearing a plate of toast. It was nearly eleven o'clock and they were breakfasting late, but Mrs. Weasley had thought it advisable to let her exhausted daughter and youngest son get a little extra sleep after what they'd been through the past week. As a consequence, there were only three of them at the breakfast table, Mr. Weasley having already departed for a meeting at the Ministry. "What exactly is the situation with the Malfoy boy? Sirius said he was missing...?"

"He's missing," agreed Ron blandly, reaching for the toast. "That's the situation."

"I remember seeing him at Flourish and Blott's several years ago, with his awful father," mused Mrs. Weasley, half to herself. "He looked a pale, underfed little thing..."

"He's grown a lot since then," said Ginny in what she hoped was a neutral tone, and reached for the jam.

"Is he at all like Lucius?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Not to speak ill of the dead, but..."

"Yes, he's just like him," said Ron, at the same time that Ginny said, "No! Not at all."

Mrs. Weasley looked startled.

Ron rolled his eyes. "You'll have to forgive Ginny," he said to his mother in a world-weary tone. "She fancies him."

The jam spoon flew out of Ginny's hand. "Ron, be quiet," she said, glaring at her brother.

"Well, you do," said Ron. "You fancy the pants off him. Admit it."

Ginny was conscious of her mother watching this exchange with a lively interest, and blushed bright red.

"I thought you fancied Harry," said Mrs. Weasley cheerfully. "I *am* behind the times."

"Harry's old news," said Ron, with a grin that was half malice, half mischief. "Discarded, kicked to the curb, The Boy Who Got Dumped. Not that you were ever going out," he added to Ginny, "but you know what I mean."

"Ron," said Mrs. Weasley in a quelling tone, although her eyes were dancing. "Leave your sister alone."

Ron turned to her, looking injured, "But Mum, he's a *Malfoy!*"

"So what?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Don't be so medieval, Ron." Ron goggled at his mother like a stranded goldfish while she reached serenely for the teapot. "You'll have to learn to get along with him, won't you?" she said to her son. "If he's going to be Harry's stepbrother."

Ron mumbled something that sounded like "Not if he never turns up again."

Ginny glared at him, and turned to her mother, "That's a good point, Mum. If Harry likes him -"

Ron made an impatient noise. "Harry *doesn't* like him."

Mrs. Weasley looked curious. "Wouldn't you describe Draco as a friend of Harry's?"

"No," said Ron. "I would describe him as a twat in pretentious trousers."

"That," said Mrs. Weasley, in a tone of voice that meant she was not to be argued with, "is *not* the impression I got."

"What, you're a fan of the leather trousers too, Mum?" Ron asked, misinterpreting her on purpose and grinning as he did so.

Mrs. Weasley looked surprised, then smiled. "Leather trousers? You know, Sirius used to have leather trousers back when he had his motorcycle. Before...well, you know. When he was doing his Auror training at the Ministry. Sometimes," she added, looking faintly misty, "he even wore them to work."

"MUM!" exclaimed Ron, looking appalled.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. "Never mind. Now, what were we talking about? Oh, yes I had a question for you two. What do you think of Professor Lupin?"

This abrupt change of topic made both Ron and Ginny blink in surprise. Ron recovered first. "Lupin? He's great," he said. "Best teacher we ever had."

Ginny nodded agreement. "He always has chocolate. What's not to like?"

"He asked me the oddest question," said Mrs. Weasley. "He wanted to know if we had any Hufflepuff ancestors."

Ron and Ginny exchanged glances; Ron spoke first. "What'd you say, Mum?"

Mrs. Weasley turned a bit pink around the ears. "I didn't say anything. Luckily your father was talking to Sirius or he would have started going on and on about how the Weasley family weasel looks a lot like the Hufflepuff badger, and how the Burrow used to be a castle -"

"And the wine cellar used to be a dungeon," said Ron in a bored tone. "And the rock quarry out back used to be a moat. It's all nonsense, anyway."

"Well, there are manacles on the wall down in the wine cellar," Ginny pointed out.

"Yeah," said Ron, his voice dripping sarcasm, "because Fred and George put them there so they could chain up Percy when he was supposed to be babysitting."

Mrs. Weasley was horrified. "Fred and George chained up Percy?"

Ron looked as if he was aware he had said something he shouldn't. "Well, it was all in good fun and they never used the leg irons -"

Ron was saved further explanation as, with a soft \*pop\* Mr. Weasley Apparated into the kitchen.

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley jumped up, startled by the sight of her

husband. Ginny, too, looked at him curiously; she had never seen her father look so disheveled. His robes were creased and untidy, his red hair standing up every which way, his face crumpled into lines of strain and dismay. "Arthur," Mrs. Weasley said again, hurrying towards him. "What's the matter? What are you doing back from London so soon?"

"The meeting was over," said Mr. Weasley tonelessly. "They've chosen a new Minister of Magic."

Ron swiveled around in his seat to stare at his father. "Who is it?"

Mr. Weasley swallowed visibly. "Well," he said slowly. "Me."

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Hermione, Sirius and Lupin were eating breakfast in the library when Harry wandered in, tousle-haired and yawning. Hermione glanced up and smiled when she saw him, although her smile faded a bit when she realized how tired he looked. The indigo sweater he wore rather unhappily matched the blue shadows under his eyes. "Hey," he said, glancing around in surprise, "how long have you guys been awake? How come nobody came and got me up?"

Sirius glanced up from the papers he was perusing. "We thought it was better to let you sleep."

"It must be three in the afternoon," said Harry irritably, came over to Hermione, kissed her rather perfunctorily on the ear, and threw himself down in a chair. "Where's Narcissa?"

"She had to go to the Ministry; there's an inquest into Lucius' death," Sirius replied.

"Don't they want to talk to you, too, Sirius? I mean you were actually in the cell where he..."

"Exploded?" Hermione finished for him, sweetly. She felt a bit guilty about not being more sorry that Lucius was dead, but couldn't shake the feeling that, assuming that they managed to get Draco back

safely and in one piece, it was the best thing that could have happened for him.

"Don't remind me. Yes, I'll be going to the Ministry tomorrow." He flipped over a page, sighed irritably, and glared over at Lupin. "Are you sure this translation key you gave me is correct? I can't make any sense out of this spell..."

"You've got a translation key for the Parseltongue?" asked Harry curiously.

"I managed to take the Parseltongue spell off the book," said Lupin, pushing the diary towards Harry and Hermione. "The problem is that the most useful part of the book, which is where Slytherin listed all the spells he used, was doubly encoded...he was apparently very suspicious that someone might try to steal his spells. He wrote in Mermish, Trollish, French..."

"Too bad Fleur isn't here to help you," said Sirius and gave Lupin a huge, obnoxious smile.

"Giantish, Greek - shut up, Sirius - and something that looks a lot like mirror writing. Not, perhaps his best effort..."

Sirius, meanwhile, was staring cross-eyed at one of the pieces of parchment that had a spell in Mermish copied onto it. "'Enliven the fearsome sex weevil '? That *can't* be right."

"Sirius..." Hermione made a face at him, reached forward, and took the parchment out of his hand. "It says *fallax proefini...imago moli*...it's Latin, not a spell I know, but it means something about projecting images..." She looked at Lupin. "Is this the Magid one?"

"What Magid one?" demanded Harry.

Lupin sighed. "There's a spell Slytherin claimed allowed him to find his Source...that would be Rowena...wherever she was, and project himself there."

"But Draco's not my Source," said Harry flatly.



"No, but the mental link you have is very much like what might exist if he were. It's worth a try anyway," said Sirius, raising his head. "I'll put a Locator Charm on you, and once we send you through to where Draco is, I'll follow right after you."

Hermione glanced up quickly. "Is this going to be dangerous for Harry?"

"No," said Lupin, a little absently, and put down the book he was holding. "He'll be fine, especially because-

"But we don't even know if the mental link is *working*," Harry interrupted, shaking a lock of dark hair impatiently out of his eyes. "It's not like I know where he is..."

Lupin reached into his pocket and took his wand out. "Give me your hand, Harry -- your *right* hand." Harry held his hand out and Lupin turned it over, palm-up, and laid the tip of his wand against the jagged scar that ran diagonally across Harry's palm. Harry shuddered, as if this pained him, and his eyes met Hermione's across the desk. "This scar connects you two," said Lupin, "just as the scar on your forehead connects you to Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "I know."

"Hold still," Lupin said.

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Draco wished he could sleep, but the Wakefulness potion didn't allow it. He had been grateful at first for the alert and burning energy it gave him, but now he felt weary of it. Not that he wanted to sleep and dream - he certainly didn't want that. But he was bored. Snape had gone into his workroom to play with his potions, and Draco had been kicking aimlessly around the house. He'd discovered very little, except that Snape had peculiar musical taste and that, if what was folded on top of the washing machine was any indication

to go by, he slept in blue flannel pajamas decorated with little red hearts. *Yikes*, Draco thought.

He thought again of the Daily Prophet with its article on his father's death, and determined to go ask Snape if he could have another look at it. He trudged down the hall to the Potions' master's workroom, and pushed the door open.

The cauldrons were still bubbling merrily away, but Snape, seated at his desk, appeared to be asleep, his head down on his arms, a quill drooping from his fingers. Seeing the Daily Prophet folded up on the edge of the desk, he reached out for it, and paused. A pad of paper lay about five inches from Snape's hand, and on it he saw written his own name.

It's a rare person who can see their own name written down by someone else, and not want to investigate. Moving quietly, Draco dragged the pad a little towards him across the desk, and turned it around to read what was written there in Snape's cramped handwriting... *I gave the potion to the Malfoy boy and it did not hurt him, so he is not as far gone as I might have feared. Still, he has that look on him already, the presage of violent death. I am not sure how much I can or should tell him about the potion: that as with many drugs, with use its effects are dulled, becoming almost insignificant within a matter of months. If it had not been for the defeat of the Dark Lord, the potion could not have saved me. ....I wish that Dumbledore were here to advise me...*

Draco pushed the pad away from him, turning away from the desk, a sick feeling in his stomach. He walked out of the room into the hall, turned blindly to the right, opened the door there and found himself standing on the porch in bright sunlight. The light stabbed at his eyes like knives and he sat down rather suddenly, his back against the wall of the house, drawing his knees up to his chest.

So the potion was just a stopgap, if that. Snape had sounded as if he wasn't sure at all how long it would continue to work. It was certainly working now, Draco could feel it, had felt it kick in not long ago. The change had been immediate. It was as if someone had

dropped a heavy iron portcullis between him and the surge and clamor of the demands that had been his constant companions. The waking dreams were gone, the cloudy vision, the feeling that his ears were always ringing. He hadn't realized how quiet the world was, how still and how peaceful.

But gone, too, was the exhilaration, the knowledge that with the sword, he could do things he knew he would never otherwise have been able to do, even if he was a Magid. Inside the dragon pen, he had known he had the power inside him to hold all those dragons back and he had done it, raising his hands to ward them off as if they were no more than shadows, and he had felt powerful. The power drew on him like fire drawing oxygen, leaving only ashes behind. And it was a dark and exquisite pleasure to use it. So exquisite it hurt, and so dark that it was frightening.

When he closed his eyes, he could see the shadow of his dreams printed against his inner lids. *What you want*, his father had said, *what you can have, and what could be*. His father's explanation of his own birth and purpose had made some sense to him. If nothing else, it explained the yearning he felt when he held the sword in his hand, the nameless internal stretching towards something just out of reach. *It's your destiny. It has you.*

He had been offered more than power, more than whatever else it was he thought he might have wanted: Hermione and her love, glory, a place in the world. He had been offered something that Harry had that he had always envied: a purpose, a reason for living, a *destiny*. And the pull of it was strong; the pull of it was...intoxicating. No wonder Charlie had thought he was drugged.

"To have resisted this far you must have a strong will," Snape had said. "You were meant to give in. And you haven't given in."

*But I know the truth*, he thought bitterly. *I'm not strong. If there is anything in me, in my mind or my soul, that fights the sword and its promises and the black dreams it brings, it isn't my own strength. It's Harry.* Whatever little bit of Harry he had managed to hold on

to, whatever the Polyjuice Potion had left him, that speaking voice in the back of his brain that said *this isn't right*. Harry, who could fight the Imperius Curse - *I could never do that*. Harry, who was good without trying.

Harry, who he was supposed to kill.

And would, if he got the chance.

Draco reached out and took hold of the sword, his thin fingers wrapping themselves around the smooth, familiar, slightly dented hilt. He drew it towards him and onto his lap, the green jewels in the hilt winking at him like knowing eyes. The pattern on the hilt was of snakes, the emeralds their eyes; one of the jewels, Draco saw, turning the sword over, was missing...he wondered why he had never noticed that before. The sword was heavy in his hand. *I'm going to die*, he had told Ginny. *At least it's more warning than most people get*.

He glanced up. It was late afternoon, the sky a hot metallic blue. He stood up quickly and decidedly, gripping the sword, and went back into the house, heading for the closet where he had left Charlie's clothes and his Firebolt.

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Ginny looked disconsolately at her reflection in the hallway mirror. Her hair wanted cutting, she thought; it spilled over her ears and down her back in flaming loops and ringlets, and amid all that color she thought her face looked too pale and small. Almost absently, she reached up and began to wind it into braids behind her head. She was worried, not just about Draco now, but also about her parents. Far from being pleased by Mr. Weasley's sudden promotion, Mrs. Weasley had been terrified and furious. "Look what happened to Fudge!" she had raged at her husband. "They're just looking for someone they can set up, someone expendable! Don't accept, Arthur!"

Mr. Weasley hadn't agreed, and the argument had gone on for

hours. Eventually her parents had decided to Apparate themselves to London to talk things over with Percy, whose Ministry connections had proven valuable before. And so they had gone, and Ginny and Ron were alone in the house.

Ginny finished braiding her hair, sighed, and decided to go upstairs and talk to Ron. She was still irritated with him for being so obnoxious at breakfast, but so what, she was bored and he might want to play Exploding Snap with her.

She was just crossing the living room on her way to the stairs when she heard the noise.

*Whap!*

Ginny stiffened at the sound: a dull glassy thump, as if a bird had flown into the living room window. She paused and stared, and heard it again, sharper this time: *whap!*

More curious than apprehensive, Ginny crossed the room to the window, drew the curtain back - and yelled out loud in surprise.

Draco Malfoy was standing just outside the half-open window, peering in. When she yelled, he jumped back, and waved frantically at her to be quiet. "Ginny! *Shhhh!*"

Ginny clapped her hand over her mouth, staring. It was Draco, very evidently Draco, looking much as she had seen him last, although now he looked vexed.

"Did you *have* to scream?" he hissed.

"Did you have to scare me half to death?"

Draco looked affronted. "I knocked!"

"Yeah, on the *window!*" she hissed. "Why couldn't you come to the door like a regular person?"

"I didn't want to see the rest of your family. I wanted to see *you*. I was waiting for you to be alone. Now are you going to let me in or not?"

Ginny looked at him uncertainly, but his words echoed in her ears: I wanted to see *you*. She reached out and pulled the window all the way up, allowing him to climb inside. He crawled over the sill and landed on his feet, straightening up slowly. Ginny stared at him in surprise. For someone who usually looked so neat, he was surprisingly disheveled, his hair messy, dirt and mud on the knees of his jeans. There was even a long rip across the front of his dragonhide jacket. And to top it all off, he had a cut lip and a black eye that was already beginning to turn five shades of the rainbow. Ginny goggled at him. "What happened to your *face*? Did you get in a fight?"

Draco reached up and gingerly touched the corner of his eye. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," said Ginny.

Draco grinned and looked as if he were about to make a snide remark, when they both heard the sound of a step in the hallway, and Ron's voice calling : "Ginny?"

*He heard me scream*, she thought, turning to Draco - who reached out and seized her shoulder, and then there was a sudden whirl of movement and the next thing she knew she they had rolled under the enormous overstuffed sofa, and she was lying on her back with Draco on top of her, his legs intertwined with hers, his hand covering her mouth. He needn't have bothered; she was too astonished, and too winded from being thrown suddenly to the floor, to even think about making a noise. She could feel Draco's heart banging against hers. Her gaze flicked up, fastened on his: she saw anxiety as well as amusement in his eyes before he glanced away.

The living room door opened, and Ron came in. All she could see of her brother were his shoes, which crossed the room quickly to the

open window. She could picture Ron looking at it, puzzled, wondering... "Hey!" he called again. "Ginny! Where are you?"

Draco's body tensed against hers as Ron turned away from the window and came to stand in the middle of the room. He was standing so close to the sofa under which they were lying that Ginny could see where one of his shoelaces had been broken and retied. Feeling suddenly guilty, she closed her eyes and turned her face into Draco's shoulder. She could smell the material of his jacket - it smelled unnervingly of Charlie - but under that, he smelled like soap and blood and cold night air. It was a very *boy* sort of smell, and it made her a little dizzy.

"Ginny!" Ron called again, sounding exasperated. "Look, I know you're around here, I heard you. Are you still hacked off at me about what I said at breakfast?"

A strand of Draco's silvery-fine hair fell across her face, tickling her mouth and nose, making her want to sneeze. She tensed, and Draco pulled back from her ever so slightly; she could see the corner of one gray eye now, the smooth plane of his cheek, and the glitter of gold chain against his throat that was the Epicyclical Charm.

"*Ginny!*" Ron called again, then sighed. "All right, fine, be that way," he snapped, and she saw his shoes moving away as he crossed the room into the kitchen. She began to move out from under the sofa, but Draco's grip tightened on her arm, and she heard him whisper, "*Wait.*"

A moment later came the familiar sound of the kitchen door slamming. Ron had gone out into the garden.

Ginny twisted her head to the side so that she could see Draco properly. He was looking down at her, his expression serious but his gray eyes dancing. "Now you can move," he said, not whispering but speaking softly. "If you want to."

All the little hairs on the back of her neck seemed to prickle, and she shivered all over, whether from the look on his face or simply from nerves, she wasn't sure. "Of course I want to move," she

whispered back, "you're crushing me and your stupid belt buckle is digging into my leg."

Draco looked down at her with limpid, innocent eyes. "How do you know that's my belt buckle?"

"Very amusing." Feeling herself blush, she broke their eye contact and wriggled out from under him, and then out from under the sofa. She stood up, brushing lint off her jeans, and glared as Draco crawled out after her - irritatingly, he managed to make even wriggling out from under an overstuffed sofa look both graceful and intentional. Although when he stood up, she was happy to see that quite a bit of lint had attached itself to his coat.

Looking at him sidelong, she said, "Do you want to come up to my bedroom? We can talk there."

"No," said Draco witheringly. "I want to stay here in the living room and wait for your six brothers to come home, find me with you, kill me, and make trendy yet tasteless beaded curtains out of my lower intestines."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "All my brothers except Ron aren't here anyway. And my parents are in London."

"Well, I wish you'd told me that before. If I'd known it was just Ron, I'd have snuck up behind him and whapped him over the head with my broomstick, and then we could have talked freely."

"You would not have-" Ginny began automatically, then shook her head. "Okay, it's you, so maybe you would have. But I don't want to think about it. Now be quiet and follow me."

To her surprise, Draco was obedient, following her silently up the stairs and down the hall to her bedroom. Once inside, she shut the door quickly behind them and flipped the lock. "*Luminesce*," she whispered, and the dark room lit with a soft glow.

She turned and looked at Draco, who was glancing around, looking vaguely dumbfounded. "So," she said to him quickly, before an



awkward silence could descend, "are you going to tell me what happened to your face, or not? You look horrible."

"You'll give me a big head, talking like that."

"I'm serious. What *happened*?"

"Neville Longbottom," said Draco, enunciating very clearly, "hit me in the eye with his Remembrall." He rubbed at the aforementioned eye ruefully, then glanced over at her bed. "Can I sit down?" he asked, and proceeded to flop down on the flowered coverlet without waiting for her to answer. She had, she had to admit, had several fantasies which involved Draco being in her bedroom, but she had never stopped to consider how very out of place Draco in leather trousers actually looked against the backdrop of floral wallpaper, fuzzy white rug, and battered old stuffed animals.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "I'm glad you think my black eye is amusing."

Ginny stopped smiling. "I don't. Well, maybe a little bit. Neville Longbottom? How on earth...?"

"I got this idea in my head," said Draco, gesturing eloquently with one lazy hand. "That I should go around and sort of...apologize to the people I've wronged. I'm not sure why exactly. Sometimes I get these ideas and they always seem quite silly in retrospect, but anyway I got it in my head that I wanted to make amends. So I made a list of the people that I've wronged, and it was really, really long, so I threw it away and made a shorter list of people I've *really* wronged, who also happen to live not too far away. And Neville was first."

"So why did he hit you with the Remembrall? What did you do to him?"

Draco looked injured. "Nothing! I got to his house, rang the doorbell, Neville took one look at me and launched the Remembrall at my head. Hit me in the eye. I suppose I should just be happy he wasn't toting around a pair of hedge clippers or he'd have taken my

ears off and kept them as a trophy."

"Did you get a chance to apologize to him?"

"Nah, I just left, but you know, I get the impression Neville feels better now so it wasn't an entirely wasted afternoon." Draco looked pained. "Now, Hagrid was next on my list. He's a lot bigger than Longbottom," he added thoughtfully, "but I'm faster than him. I figure I should have just enough time to run up, apologize to him, and make a clean getaway before he gets the chance to stomp me into the consistency of instant porridge mix."

Ginny realized that she was struggling not to laugh. This is so unfair, she thought irritably. A year ago, if someone had asked her for three words that described Draco Malfoy, she would have chosen "complete" "utter" and "bastard." Now words like "engaging" and "funny" and even "charming" kept popping into her head.

"What's wrong? You look like you're getting a headache," asked Draco.

"I just realized why you came here," she announced, putting her hands on her hips and fixing him with a glare that she didn't really mean. "You want me to fix your eye, don't you? Like I'm some sort of municipal Malfoy emergency room. I've already splinted your leg and fixed your bite marks and now -"

"That's *not* why I came," he interrupted her, amusement quickening his voice. "I told you. I'm trying to make amends."

That brought her up short. "You came here to apologize to *me*?"

Now he looked slightly abashed. "Well, no," he admitted. "Actually I thought you could tell Harry something for me."

Ginny shook her head, her braids snapping back and forth. "No way. Tell him yourself."

"I can't," said Draco, a slight edge to his voice.

"Why not?"

"I can't. You'll just have to trust me on that."

"No," said Ginny.

"*What?*"

"No," she said again, and went over to sit down next to him on the bed. He was still looking at her disbelievingly. "I don't trust you. Why should I? You've never given me any reason to. I like you, but I don't trust you. And after what you did yesterday, Mr. I'm-Going-To-Run-Off-By-Myself-And-Not-Even-Tell-Anyone-Where-I'm-Going-"

"Yeah," he interrupted her, with a faint smile, "you know, I'm just going by 'Draco' now."

Ginny pressed her mouth into a thin line. "Whatever. Look, I'm not going to tell Harry anything for you. You should tell him yourself. He's worried about you, anyway. I bet he'd be glad to see you."

"He'll have a lot more to worry about if he *does* see me," said Draco, but seemed disinclined to elaborate. He leaned back against the wall. "I guess you wouldn't be inclined to tell Hermione anything for me either-"

"Certainly not."

"Or Sirius?"

"I said no."

"This is proving to be an entirely unrewarding visit."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. "You're a bastard sometimes, aren't you?"

He actually looked contrite. "Oh, God. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." He looked at her earnestly, or at least as earnestly as he

ever looked. "It's been a very strange past few days," he said slowly. "I'm not thinking all that straight right now. My father -" he waved away her expression of sympathy - "No, don't look like that, I'm not sorry, why should you be? The whole love potion thing, and not being able to tell Harry, fighting with Sirius, lots of nightmares, two confusing snog sessions, you know it's all just very-" He broke off, seeming to realize that Ginny was staring at him with a very odd expression. "What?"

"Two confusing snog sessions? Did you snog Hermione *again*? Harry's going to kill you, you know."

Draco actually flushed, the tops of his cheekbones turning dark red. "No. I didn't snog Hermione again."

Ginny stared. "So it was somebody else? Draco, when did you find the *time*?"

Draco sighed and flopped backwards against the wall, looking at her guiltily. "It was Fleur Delacour."

"*Fleur*? Bill's girlfriend?"

"I'd forgotten about that...look, there were special circumstances. I *had* to."

"*Had* to?" Ginny stared at him in disbelief. "You're really just moral garbage, aren't you?"

Draco looked wounded. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Ginny threw a pillow at him, which he made no move to block. Instead he smiled, which was greatly annoying, because Ginny had always privately thought that he had a lovely smile. He was oddly like Harry in that when he smiled, he smiled with his whole face - not just his mouth but his eyes. Of course, he smiled much less frequently than Harry, but the resemblance was there. "Do you care what I do, one way or the other?"

"No," said Ginny, and then, "Well. Maybe." She sighed. "You're just so...fickle."

"Fickle? I am not fickle."

"Yes, you are. You're meant to be pining for Hermione, but you flirt with me - yes, you do, don't deny it - and in the meantime you're snogging Fleur. You're fickle."

"I'm not fickle, I'm just a Malfoy. In the good old days, the head of the Malfoy household would have nine, ten wives maybe and I assure you he was most devoted to them all."

"Is there *anything* you don't joke about?"

Draco looked amused. "What makes you think I'm joking?" He reached over then, and gently touched one of her braids. "Your ribbon's coming undone," he said, deftly retied it, and sat back.

Ginny stared at him. It had been an oddly -- well, brotherly wasn't really the word, as none of her brothers would have noticed something amiss with her hair - affectionate gesture. She sighed. "I just wish you'd be honest," she said.

Draco's eyes darkened. "I don't lie."

This gave Ginny momentary pause. He *doesn't* lie, she thought, does he... He didn't even lie about the love potion...just didn't mention it, and she was fairly sure that Hermione had made him promise to do that. She bit her lip and was about to respond when there was a sharp knock on her door. "Ginny!" came Ron's sharp voice. "I know you're in there. I heard you."

"Go away, Ron!" Ginny yelled back.

"No," said Ron stubbornly. "I am not going away. I'm giving you one minute and then I'm going to knock the door down."

Ginny looked wildly at Draco, then grabbed his arm and dragged him over to her closet. She yanked the door open and pushed him inside. Standing on top of a pile of her shoes, he looked at her with doleful eyes. "This is really uncomfortable," he whined.

"You weren't complaining when you dragged me under the sofa."

"That was different. I had you for company." He gave her a sunny smile. "It's not the same as being shut in a closet alone."

"Time for you to learn to entertain yourself," said Ginny, about to shut the door.

His sunny smile turned devilish. "My mother always said that would make me go blind," he said.

"Argh," replied Ginny, and slammed the closet shut.

She turned quickly, pointed her wand at her bedroom door, and said "*Alohomora!*"

The door burst open and Ron half-fell into the room. He recovered his footing quickly, straightened up, and glared at her. "What is your problem, Gin? Didn't you hear me calling you all over the house for the past half hour?"

"No," Ginny lied. "I was sleeping."

"I heard you yelling."

"I was having a bad dream."

This piece of information had the opposite effect that Ginny had intended, as Ron immediately stepped farther into the room, looking concerned. "Are you sure you're okay? Do you want me to sit with you?"

"I'm fine," said Ginny irritably. "I'm not twelve any more, Ron."

"I know that. But you're really sensitive to Dark magic, and we've been around a lot of it lately. Don't tell me it hasn't upset you."

Ginny sighed, torn between the urge to shove Ron out of the room and the urge to snifle and have him pat her head. Of all her brothers, Ron was her favorite. Fred and George made her laugh more, but Ron had an earnest sweetness that was very restful to be

around.

"And look," added Ron, toeing the ground a bit, "I'm sorry about all the stuff I said about Malfoy at breakfast."

Ginny gaped at him in horror. "Ron, it's okay, I-"

"No," he said, holding up a hand. "Let me finish. I don't like Malfoy, I'm never going to like him, I still think he's a low-life, double-crossing sleazeball with all the charm of a week-old head of lettuce. But if you really like him all that much, I'll uh...I'll make an effort to find something worthwhile about him. And I won't downgrade him in front of Mum. Okay?"

"Ron, I - I mean, look, go ahead and downgrade him, really, it's all right, I don't mind."

Ron shook his head. "Yeah, whatever, Gin. You know, it sort of takes the fun out of mocking him when you're sitting there with drool all down your front."

Ginny emitted a small scream of horrified outrage. "*Drool!*"

"Look, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Well, okay, it is, because it's Malfoy and it's gross, but you know, he's really, really lucky that you even like him and -"

Goggling in horror, Ginny cut her brother off in the midst of this extremely well-meant, if somewhat poorly worded speech, by spluttering: "*Ron! Shut up!*"

He stared at her. "Shut up?" he echoed. "Why?"

"Because I never said anything about Draco -- I never said anything about anything. Ever! I don't know what you're talking about! I've got a headache now and I think you should go!"

And with that, Ginny pushed her bewildered brother out into the hallway, slammed the door behind him, and leaned against it, covering her face with her hands. Her hope that maybe Draco

hadn't heard her exchange with Ron was shattered as he stepped out of the closet and looked at her solemnly. "Drool, eh?" he said, with a mildly inquiring look.

"Oh, be quiet," said Ginny wearily, and to her surprise, he fell silent, hands in his pockets, looking at her from under his hair, which had gotten awfully long lately and which she kept having the urge to push back out of his eyes - "I think you'd better go," she heard herself say.

Looking startled, Draco took his hands out of his pockets. "Yeah, okay, if you want me to," he said, a little stiffly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that being utterly humiliated tends to put a damper on my mood."

"Ginny," he said, and he saw a flash of sympathy in his silver-black eyes, "Look-"

"Don't," she said. "Just...come here for a minute."

He crossed the room to her and stood in front of her, looking inquiring. She looked up into his face, wondering how she could feel so drawn to someone she didn't trust at all, and then again, wondering why she didn't trust him. Maybe it was because she was drawn to him, or even because she found him attractive; after all, the best-looking boy she had ever known had been Tom Riddle. Maybe she just didn't trust good-looking men. But she knew that wasn't it either; it was the coldness that surrounded him, an icy chill that she felt all the way down to her bones. She reached up, hardly thinking about what she was doing, and put her hand on his face, reaching into her pocket with her other hand and drawing out her wand as she did so.

His skin was so cold it burned her palm. He didn't move as she raised the wand and touched the tip lightly to his skin, "*Asclepio*," she said, and the bruising around his eye vanished.

She lowered her wand. "Is that better?"



Draco looked unusually subdued. "Yeah. Thank you."

"I don't know what's wrong with you, Draco," she said, finally saying what she'd been wanting to say all evening. "I don't know what it is that's in you, but there's something and it's something evil and dark. It's like poison in your blood. You *have* to go to Sirius or to someone and *you have to get help or-*"

He cut her off. "Or I'll die. Yeah. I know."

"Go home," she said. "Please don't try to do this by yourself."

"I can't."

"Please," she said. "For me."

He looked astonished, as if this request had shocked him, and fast on the heels of his astonishment came a look of regret. "Ginny -" he reached out and took her by the upper arms. His hands were so cold it was like having two frozen metal bracelets clasped around her skin. "I'm sorry," he said, "I really am sorry," and suddenly the tension between them altered in a way she couldn't name; she saw his half-startled expression as she lifted up her face to his, saw his eyes close as he lowered his mouth to hers - she felt his hair brush her cheek, and then his cold mouth on her own - his lips were like ice at first, rapidly warming to the temperature of her own blood -

No. She pushed him away with such force that he actually made a little noise of surprise, a sort of cross between a gasp and an "oooph." He looked at her in astonishment.

She felt as if she couldn't catch her breath, but tried to speak normally. "Are you going to go home?"

"Ginny-" He sighed. "You know I'm not."

"Then you don't get to kiss me," she said, and crossed her arms over her chest. "It isn't fair. And don't expect me to be grateful, either."

I'm not. Maybe I like you, but that doesn't make me stupid."

Draco just looked at her. Finally, he said, very coldly, 'Yes, it does.' He hunched his shoulders inside his jacket as if he were suddenly cold. "And it makes me even stupider. And stupid for coming here."

"Draco-

"Just forget it," he said, and crossed the room to the window. He leaned over the sill, reaching out a hand, and she heard him call: "*Accio* Firebolt!"

A moment later, his broomstick was in his hand. Lifting it, he crawled out onto the sill, swung his legs over it, and without a further word to Ginny, disappeared into the darkness.



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Hermione crossed the library to where Harry stood at the window, looking out. It was sunset now, the sun going down in a fiery ball against a sky the shade of blood and amber. In the rosy-bronze light, Harry looked grave and thoughtful, the shadows below his

eyes darkened to the color of bruises.

"Harry," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Weird," he replied, turning to look at her. "Like someone switched a light on in the back of my head."

"You look a little different."

"Great. Am I starting to look like Malfoy all of a sudden? Wouldn't that be ironic."

"No, you don't look like him. You look...more yourself than you did before, actually, if that makes sense."

She was conscious of Lupin and Sirius sitting at the desk behind them, too far away to hear what they were saying, but she knew they were studying Harry anxiously. It had taken hours of attempts at getting the spell right before Harry had suddenly clapped his hands to his temple and said, "Stop. *Stop*. It's working." Then he had gotten abruptly to his feet, walked over to the window, and stared out.

"It doesn't make sense, but that's fine," he said, uncrossing his arms. He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up, looking into her eyes. Hermione felt her stomach plummet - it was both pleasant and also frightening to be studied so closely, especially by Harry, who could read her every expression as easily as he could read Parseltongue. "You want me to tell you where he is," he said. "Don't you?"

Hermione said nothing, and Harry removed his hand from her chin. "Well, I don't know where he is," he said. "I can tell you he isn't feeling very well, and I can tell you he's freezing cold, and I can tell you he's thinking about..." and he smiled suddenly, wryly. "Ginny. Well, isn't that interesting."

Hermione winced, only very slightly, but Harry saw it.

He frowned. "You don't like hearing that, do you?"

She felt a cold tightening in her stomach. It was a familiar feeling, one she had gotten used to over the past few days, an icy sort of twisting. It was odd, she thought, the induced love for Draco that she felt didn't manifest itself in her head or her thoughts, but in her body, knotting her stomach muscles, tightening like a band around her heart. It was constant, as if someone had lodged a cold anchor in her stomach, so constant she had nearly gotten used to it, except for times like these, when it twinged. "Harry... you *know*..."

"I know," he said, and added abruptly, "and you know, don't you, that if we can't take this spell off you, there's no way that our relationship is going to last?"

Hermione looked at him, appalled. "But you said -"

"I know what I said. But let's be realistic. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life with someone who is always going to be in love with someone else. I deserve better than that, God, anyone would deserve better than that."

"Nobody said anything about the rest of your life," said Hermione, and instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry," she said, quickly. "It's just that," and her eyes widened, "you sound like *him*, like Draco, you sound just like him again..."

"What, and you don't like it?" he shot back, turned, and walked back towards Lupin and Sirius, throwing himself down in an armchair and stretching his legs out. Which, Hermione thought, was how Draco sat. *Arggh*.

She followed Harry over to the desk, and sat down next to him. Sirius and Lupin, who had been in whispered conference, turned to look at them.

"Let's do this," said Harry.

"Right now?" asked Lupin, laying down the papers he had been holding and looking at Harry over his glasses.

"Why not right now?" said Harry flatly. "You said he was in danger. He's not going to be in less danger in an hour, or two hours."

Lupin and Sirius exchanged looks. Hermione knew exactly what they were thinking: *Harry's acting oddly, isn't he?*

*You bet he is*, she thought darkly. Harry's harsh words back at the window had shaken her. She knew that when he was linked to Draco, as he had been under the Polyjuice potion, he tended to say things that were unpleasant.

He also tended to say things that were true.

"All right," said Sirius, coming around the desk to sit by Harry. "We've worked the second stage of the spell out. It shouldn't be too difficult to do. Remus?" he added, glancing up at Lupin, who appeared to be lost in thought.

"Oh...yes," said Lupin, slowly gathering up some papers and coming around to Harry's side of the desk. When he took his wand out, Hermione saw to her surprise that his hand was shaking. She wondered if he was worried about Harry, and felt a sudden cold stab of fear at her heart.

He held the wand forward, and put the tip of it to Harry's forehead. Harry looked up at him with steady green eyes. "All right," said Lupin, "now, Padfoot, you be ready too. *Imago moli-*" he began, paused, seemed to hesitate, and started again, "*imago moli-*"

There was a clatter as the wand tumbled out of Lupin's hand and he suddenly fell back, heavily, against the desk. Harry looked up in alarm. "Professor, why did you--"

Sirius interrupted him. "Remus?" He looked at his friend, the flicker of surprise on his face turning quickly into alarm. He set down the book he was holding and came to stand by Lupin, putting a hand on his arm. "Remus, are you--?"

Lupin raised his head, and looked at Sirius. "The Change," he said.

"What, *now*?"

"It shouldn't be now, not by my calculations, not until tomorrow night. But I know what this is, Sirius." Lupin looked up, and Hermione could see the lines of tension at the corners of his eyes and mouth. "Take me downstairs and lock me up," he said.

Sirius hesitated.

"We *talked* about this," said Lupin, with an edge to his voice. "The dungeons..."

"But it's too early-"

"*Sirius*."

Sirius, arrested in mid-speech, shut his mouth and looked at Lupin with worried, dark eyes. Lupin looked back, frowning, and stood up. Hermione was reminded rather oddly of her parents when they didn't want to fight in front of her.

Sirius shrugged. "All right," he said. "All right - look, you two, I'll be back in ten minutes. Don't go anywhere."

"Can't we do the spell first?" asked Harry abruptly. "I think-"

"When I get back," said Sirius, an edge to his voice, and Harry fell silent. The moment they were gone, however, he turned to Hermione. She was taken aback by his expression - his eyes had an odd sort of light in them, and his jaw was set stubbornly. "I think we should do it," he said.

"What, right here on the desk?" asked Hermione with a wan smile. "You know Lupin said it wasn't very sturdy."

"*Don't* try to distract me," said Harry, but he almost smiled. "You

know what I mean."

"Do the spell? Send you through to where Draco is? Harry, that is not a good idea."

"You can do it, Hermione, I know you can. The complicated part of the spell is done already, all you have to do is say the words and send me through."

"I can send you through," she said. "But it'll take Sirius to bring you *back*."

"Sirius will be back in ten minutes!"

"So why can't you wait?"

"*Because I can't!*" yelled Harry, and Hermione tensed; Harry almost never yelled at anyone. "It's important," he said, "and we're not just talking about anything here, we're talking about whether he lives or dies."

The cold anchor in Hermione stomach gave a wrenching twist.

"I trust you," said Harry. "I trust you even though lately you haven't given me much of a reason to trust you about anything. Why can't you trust me?"

Hermione hesitated, then slowly, and with a consuming sense of reluctance, reached for the parchment that Sirius had left on the desk.

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*He was back in the fencing-room at Malfoy Mansion, facing his father across the flagstones. They had been practicing already for an hour and he was deadly tired, sweat stinging his eyes, clothes drenched in it. His muscles felt like overextended rubber bands. His father, of course, seemed hardly to have tired at all, but then, Draco thought resentfully, his father wasn't a thirteen-year-old boy using a*



*weapon far too large and heavy for him. I just want this over, Draco thought despairingly, but he knew his father wouldn't stop the practice until he had either disarmed his son or made him bleed. There was no question of Draco disarming Lucius, of course, his reach wasn't great enough, and anyway every attack maneuver he had ever learned had been taught to him by his father.*

*But I could still try, he thought...he recalled an extremely fancy move he had learned from his father a year ago and had been practicing in secret, involving a beat, a feint in quarte, a feint in sixte, and a lunge veering off into an attack on the opponent's sword hand. He launched into the sequence and saw Lucius' eyes widen in surprise; felt a brief thrill of victory as the tip of his sword nicked Lucius' hand -- before his father, swifter and with greater reach, lunged forward and slammed the flat of his weapon against Draco's wrist. Draco stared in dismay as his numb fingers released his blade. It clattered to the flagstone as his father, pale and angry-looking, took hold of the front of his son's shirt and shoved him up against the wall. Draco's head hit the stone with enough force to blacken his vision. Lucius drew his arm back and placed the tip of his sword against the boy's throat. "Try to use my own maneuver against me, will you?" he demanded, his voice sharp in Draco's ear. "That was stupid, very stupid. As if I would teach you a move I don't know the countermove to, you should know better. You were just showing off, weren't you, boy, it's your besetting sin. Just remember-" The sharp tip of Lucius' sword nicked his son's throat and Draco felt the blood begin to flow - "a smug scholar is only a fool, but a smug swordsman is a dead man."*

*Draco shut his eyes. "Yes, Father."*

*"Yes, Father, what?"*

*"Yes, Father, I understand."*

*Lucius took the blade away, but the cold expression did not leave his eyes. "Do you?" he said. "I really wonder. Sometimes I even wonder if perhaps you want to die."*

*"No, Father. I don't want to die."*

Draco opened his eyes and stared down at the black water fifteen feet below him. He was standing at the edge of the old rock quarry behind the Weasleys' house. He had discovered it quite by accident; flying over, he had seen the moonlight glint off the water and had descended to take a look. From the air, it had looked even more like the moat that Mr. Weasley claimed it was. Up close, it more closely resembled a long, cleft pit in the ground, falling away suddenly and sharply before his feet, studded with uneven rocks. The bottom of the quarry was flooded with water, which gave back his own reflection, dim and cloudy, backlit by a full white moon. From this angle, thrown into relief, Draco thought that he looked like his father: tall, cold, remote...

"Going swimming, Malfoy?"

Draco spun around, nearly stumbling; regained his balance, and stared.

Harry stood about ten feet from him, near where Draco had left his Firebolt, under the shade of a cluster of trees. Draco had always thought that people who claimed that they couldn't believe their eyes were overstating, but at this moment he actually could not, did not want to, believe that he was really seeing Harry.

But he was. As Harry stepped out of the shade, the moonlight traced the hollow under his eyes, the shape of his face, his set, stubborn expression. He had his hands in his pockets, but his posture wasn't casual, he was glaring at Draco with a challenging expression in his eyes.

"Potter," said Draco wearily. "You again. And no, I'm not going swimming. I don't know how to swim, for starters, and Charlie's clothes weigh about a ton. What are you doing here, anyway?"

Harry didn't open his mouth, but Draco heard his voice echo inside his head. *What do you think I'm doing here?*

Draco's jaw dropped. "How did you *do* that?"

Harry looked pleased. *Neat trick, isn't it? Lupin re-opened up that mental link we had from the Polyjuice potion..I suppose we could have done this all along if we'd bothered to try. Don't worry, he added, his mouth curling up at the corners, I can't read your mind any more than you can read mine.*

"I wasn't worried," Draco lied.

Harry's mouth curled up even further. *Yes, you were. But fear not, your fantasies about Professor Flitwick in a leather bikini are completely safe from me.*

Draco snorted. *Professor Flitwick?*

*See, there you go. You can do it too. It's a Magid thing, you know.*

Draco sighed. "Yeah, I guess I can, but so what?" he said out loud, and saw a vaguely hurt expression cross Harry's face. "Listen to me, Potter. This is not a good place for you to be right now. Go Apparate yourself back home."

*You think I don't know why you want me to go? You want to get on with drowning yourself in peace. Well, I won't leave.*

"What I do doesn't concern you."

*Damn right it concerns me-*

"Dammit, Potter, talk out loud!" Draco yelled, his frayed temper

snapping. "Get out of my head!"

Harry took a step back, now looking more than just vaguely hurt, but not a whit less stubborn. 'Fine, but-

"But nothing!" Draco shouted. "You know, it's a mystery to me how you've managed to stay alive all these years, walking blithely into horrible danger every chance you get. I bet you think it's charming and amusing and heroic. Well, it isn't. You're just stupid, is what you are. You're stupid, and you're going to die in a stupid, wasteful way - and if it wasn't for other people, you'd already be dead a hundred times over. And you know it. And that's what I can't believe. Because your life actually means something, Potter, you were put on this earth for a reason, and you just want to throw it all away. You make me sick."

Harry's eyes sparked angrily. "Me throwing my life away? That's rich, coming from you. There's no point being jealous of me when-

"Who says I'm jealous of you?"

"You are," said Harry calmly. "Just like I'm jealous of you."

"Well, of course you're jealous of me," said Draco. "I dress well, I speak beautifully, I have a great sense of humor, I can dance, I'm introspective, fun, creative, playful, and passionate, plus I have a knowledge of fine wines and am a devastatingly handsome heir to millions."

Harry eyed him narrowly. "Thanks, but I'm already in a relationship."

"Very funny," said Draco sourly.

"Can we talk about something else, Malfoy? Like the fact that your hands are shaking and you're thinking about killing yourself -"

"I wasn't going to *do* it," snapped Draco. "Everybody thinks about -"

"I don't," said Harry firmly. "Not ever."

Draco looked at Harry, who had his hands stuffed in his pockets and was looking at him with the same sort of steady searching expression he sometimes got when looking for the Snitch. He opened his mouth to say something, when he felt a sudden bolt of cold shoot up his left arm and, glancing down, saw the sword twitch in his grasp. He glanced back up at Harry, his heart beating more rapidly now. "You're still stupid," he said harshly. "Walking into traps-"

Harry looked puzzled. "Walking into traps? What traps?"

"Me," said Draco, and the sword in his hand twitched hard against his hand, like metal drawn to a powerful magnet. "I'm the trap. I thought you knew that."

Harry took a step toward him. *You wouldn't hurt me.*

"Oh, yes," said Draco. The sword jerked again in his grasp, more insistently this time, like a dog wanting to be let off its leash. Draco glanced down at it, then back up at Harry as a cold certainty spread like poison through his veins. "Yes, I will. I don't want to, but I will. Get out of here, Potter. I'm warning you."

"You're making a big fuss about nothing," said Harry, taking another step towards him. Draco couldn't quite believe how obtuse Harry was being. He wanted to cut and run, but his legs felt as if they had been filled with lead and there was a strange and increasingly terrible buzzing in his ears. *It's the potion, he thought, Snape's potion, draining out of my blood. I'm losing it, losing my grip -*

But his grip on the sword, at least, remained steady. He had the sudden wild feeling that it had welded itself to his hand and he couldn't have dropped it if he wanted to. Draco spoke rapidly, not looking at Harry. "Look, I know I haven't given you many reasons to trust me. But you have to believe me. Don't come any closer to me."

"Malfoy-"

"I'm begging you, Harry, and I don't beg, God, I don't even ask, but I'm begging you, *please* go away--"

He heard Harry laugh. "Hey. You actually said my name. That's a first, isn't it?"

Draco jerked his head up, staring at Harry, now standing less than a foot away from him, in disbelief - *how could anyone be so stupid--* "Would you just *stop blithering and get the hell out of here!*" Draco yelled, but it was too late, he felt his arm, which had been tensed against his side, whip forward without any volition of his own, the sword grasped tightly in his fist. It was what he had feared and yet entirely unexpected -- he felt his arm, utterly beyond his control, lunge forward, the sword cold in his grasp as the blade plunged squarely into the left side of Harry's chest.

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They were halfway along the underground corridor that led to the dungeons when Sirius suddenly realized that he was walking alone. Turning in confusion, he raised his wand, shedding its light along the dark corridor. "Remus?" he called.

"I'm here," came a faint voice.

Sirius raised his wand higher and saw Lupin standing very still in the middle of the corridor, bent forward slightly, his hands on his knees. Sirius went hastily to his friend and put a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," said Lupin, in a wondering tone. He coughed, and straightened up, looking at Sirius, who saw that his friend's usually steady gray eyes were lit with a muted sort of panic.

Sirius felt a cold fist of fear unfurl itself in his stomach. Lupin was rarely afraid, certainly almost never panicked. "Are you in pain?" he said. "From the Change?"

"Yes, but that's normal, you know that. This isn't the Change, Sirius. This is something else-" and with that Lupin suddenly pitched forward, stumbling into Sirius and knocking his wand out of his hand. Sirius caught his friend around the shoulders as he fell; lowered him slowly to the ground and knelt down next to him.

Lupin's face was ashen, his breathing labored. His eyes searched Sirius' face, alert now with something more than panic. "Sirius-

"Moony, what's going on?"

"I don't know-" Lupin tensed around a spasm of pain, eyes still wide. "Something's happening-" He sucked in a breath, raised his hands and stared at them. Sirius looked too, knowing what he would see: Lupin's hands were always the first thing to change. They had already begun the process, the nails lengthening and becoming glassy, fingers buckling and curving. "Sirius-I don't know what's happening to me. It's the Change, but it isn't. You have to get me into a cell."

"And lock you up? Like this? No way."

"Sirius-I think I'm being Called."

"Called?" Sirius echoed blankly.

"The centaur," said Lupin breathlessly, "he told me that Slytherin would call all the creatures he made. He warned me --"

"Is that what's making you Change?"

"Yes, I think so."

"But you're not a Dark creature -"

"I *am*, Sirius -" and Lupin suddenly arched his back and yelled out loud - almost a yell, and then again, almost a howl. He suddenly reached out and seized the collar of Sirius' shirt, his sharpened nails raking through the material, nearly grazing Sirius' throat.

Sirius reached out and caught at Lupin's hands. "Moony -"

*"Take me to the cell, Sirius! Do it!"*

Sirius was suddenly reminded of the boy he had known at school, still terrified by his own ability to transform, still frightened by the agonizing process. He had shown Sirius, once, where he skin was scarred, along his arms and legs - *"The Change breaks my bones and reforms them. If I thrash too much, sometimes the bones cut through the skin. My parents used to tie me up while I Changed. It helped a little."* But that had been when Lupin was still a child, still growing; over the years the process had become easier. So why was he in such agony now?

Sirius put his arm around Lupin and lifted him to his feet. "All right. Let's go."

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--The blade went into Harry's chest - and then the hilt of the blade - and then Draco's arm followed, and his whole body, he fell *through* Harry and onto the ground, his knees striking painfully against the rocks, the sword clattering to the ground in front of him. He stared at it wildly, not wanting to turn around, not wanting to see what he had done, or hadn't done. He heard his own heart pounding in his ears like a locomotive engine; it was deafening. And then, as if from a very long way away, he heard someone behind him clear their throat.

"Um.... Malfoy-"

Draco spun around on his knees, and stared.

Harry stood in front of him. He seemed unwounded, unruffled, even. If he looked anything, he looked faintly embarrassed. Then Draco realized something - he could, just barely, see *through* Harry, see the outline of the trees behind them through his shirt, see the faint pinpricks of the stars through his eyes. Draco's heart, which



had been pounding like a locomotive, now felt as if it had disappeared entirely and there was a huge empty whistling space in his chest. He sucked in a gasping breath and heard himself whisper, "Are you a ghost? Are you dead? Did I kill you?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I'm not dead, Malfoy. And I flatter myself that if you'd killed me, you'd know it."

Draco couldn't think of a single smart remark to make. He just kept staring at Harry. "You *look* dead."

"You've looked better yourself."

"You're *transparent*, Potter," said Draco in a voice that sounded wavery to his own ears. "If you're not dead, you'd better have a really good explanation as to why."

Harry ran a hand through his hair and smiled. "I'm an Apparition," he said.

"That's not the word *I* might use..."

"I'm not really here," explained Harry. "There was a spell in Salazar Slytherin's book that explained how to do this and Lupin thought it would be a good idea. It's almost like Apparating, except that my body stays behind at the Mansion. You can see me here, I can walk and talk, but I can't touch anything and I don't have any substance. And I can't be killed." He held out a hand to Draco. "Here, take my hand."

Draco reached for Harry's hand and was only slightly startled when his fingers passed through Harry's as if Harry had had no more substance than a cloud. Harry dropped his arm and Draco got to his feet. His legs felt a little bit like wobbly spaghetti, but they held him. He looked at Harry. "I can't believe Sirius would let you do this, even if you can't be hurt."

Harry looked slightly more embarrassed. "Well, 'let' might not be the proper word...he was meant to come with me. But he wasn't there, and I heard what you were thinking..." He raised his chin, gave Draco a stubborn look. "So I had Hermione do the spell and send me through."

"I could kill myself right now and there's not a damn thing you could do about it," Draco pointed out. "You're not even really here, Transparent Boy."

"Would you *not* call me that?"

"Sorry, it's a bit distracting talking to you when I can see through your head."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe Slytherin *wants* you to die?" said Harry abruptly.

Draco looked at him. "No. He wants me alive."

"Young Master Malfoy is correct," said a voice from behind them.

Harry and Draco had been so absorbed in glaring at each other that neither of them had seen the black-robed figure approach. Draco spun around, his eyes widening as he saw the short, round man standing on the path leading to the quarry, his hood pulled down, the moonlight reflecting off his bald head, his glittering, silver hand...

Next to him, he heard Harry give a little gasp of surprise.  
"*Wormtail.*"

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Hermione glanced up as Harry suddenly jerked sideways, his head rolling back and forth for a moment before he subsided. She let the book on her lap slide to the floor as she went over and sat down next to him on the arm of his chair.

He was quiet again, as the spell had said he would be; he wasn't supposed to even be moving. He lay immobile, breathing very shallowly, but she could see his eyes darting back and forth between his closed eyelids as if he were dreaming. *Where are you, Harry?* she thought. *What are you seeing? Have you found him? Is he all right?* That feeling was back again, that feeling as if someone had dropped

a cold anchor right in the middle of her stomach, or as if she had swallowed jagged little bits of glass. It had different when Draco had been around, closer to her, then it had felt as if she had swallowed burning matches. But this was just as bad - she missed him with a terrible acute sort of ache, and at the same time, desperately didn't want to see him, because she knew what would happen if she did.

She reached forward and gently pushed the hair out of Harry's eyes. He didn't move, didn't seem to feel her hand, but it gave her at least a momentary sense of ease just to touch him. It was torture to worry about Draco. It was worse torture to worry about Harry. But having to worry about both of them at the same time was the worst sort of torture she could have imagined. If this love potion was meant as a punishment, she thought, it's certainly working.

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The cell door clanged shut behind Sirius, clicking as it locked. His arm around Lupin's shoulders, he half-carried, half-dragged him over to the low stone bench that ran along one wall and lowered him onto it.

Lupin rolled over onto his back, looked up at Sirius, and groaned. "When I said take me to a cell and lock me in, I didn't mean you should lock yourself in *with* me, Sirius."

"I've sat with you before through the Change. I'll do it again. I can always transform if I have to."

"No..." Lupin struggled to sit up, and Sirius was freshly alarmed by how bad he looked. Pale and sweating, Lupin reached up, plucked off his glasses, and pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes. "I told you, this is different."

"He's right," said a voice behind them, and Sirius jumped, his heart slamming against his ribcage like an inexpertly hit Bludger. He spun around and saw a face pressed against the bars of the cell opposite - a gray, wrinkled face set with brilliant red eyes like coruscating jewels. The demon, he thought. Apparently it had recovered from having a wardrobe dropped on it. It looked as if it would have liked

to reach a hand through the bars, but the wards Sirius had put up prevented it.

"What do *you* know about it?" he snapped.

"The werewolf is right," said the demon again, grinning maniacally. "He's being Called. Stay in that cell with him, he'll tear you apart trying to get out."

"Shut up," Sirius told it, and turned back to Lupin, who was lying flat on the bench, his hands over his face. Sirius shuddered. All around him the dungeon was deathly cold, and every shadow contained monsters.

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"He's correct?" Harry echoed, glaring at Wormtail. "What do you mean he's correct? And how did you find us?"

Wormtail gave a cold smile. "Us?" he repeated. "That rather presupposes that I was looking for the both of you, doesn't it? And the sad fact is, young Mr. Potter, that I'm quite as surprised to see you as you are to see me. It was Draco I was looking for."

Harry glanced sideways at Draco, who had gone very pale, but didn't look surprised. "How," Draco said, in a tight voice, "did you find *me*?"

"At first, my Master watched you through that Portkey he gave you. Then you very unintelligently left it behind, and we lost you briefly. Fortunately," giggled Wormtail, and held up something in his metal hand that glittered like a tiny point of fire. The Epicyclical Charm. "Your father was kind enough to offer this to my Master in exchange for-

"For being splattered all over his cell like a Jackson Pollock painting?" snapped Draco, his voice shaking. "Your Master doesn't drive a very fair bargain, does he?"

"He is eminently fair to those who serve him fairly," said Wormtail coolly.

Draco took a step back. Harry experienced an odd urge to reach out and put a hand on the other boy's shoulder, but didn't, since he knew his hand would go right through Draco - not a sensation he particularly enjoyed. It was very strange to be present and to feel real, and yet not to be able to affect his environment in any way. He wondered if this was what it was like to be a ghost.

"Give me the Charm," said Draco, looking steadily at Wormtail.

Wormtail looked at him steadily, then did something so bizarre that Harry thought at first he was imagining it. Moving slowly and awkwardly, Wormtail got down on his knees on the grass, still looking steadily at Draco as he did so.

Draco glanced sideways at Harry, and Harry heard Draco's voice in his head: *What's he doing?*

Harry shrugged mentally. (not that hard to imagine if you think about it.) *I've no idea.*

*Maybe he wants to play leapfrog?*

*Interesting theory, but I'm thinking no.*

Harry felt Draco jump beside him, and looked up to see that a blazing circle of fire had suddenly sprung up around them, encircling the three of them inside a ring of burning grass. It didn't look like ordinary fire, either, but blazed bright gold and hurtful like the sun seen through glass. Harry saw Draco wince, and look away.

Wormtail spoke then, and his voice was his voice, but at the same time, it wasn't. "Draco Malfoy," he said, a faint buzzing undercutting his speech. "You are the Heir of Slytherin. The time has come for

you to ascend to your proper place, which is yours by right of blood and inheritance. The time has come for you to accept your patrimony."

Draco looked alarmed. *I don't have any children. I don't think I have any children. I'd remember something like that.*

*Patrimony, idiot, not palimony. It means your heritage, your destiny... look, whatever it is, you don't want it. Tell him no.*

Draco turned back to Wormtail. "No."

Wormtail glared. The fire blazing all around them made him look frightening; Harry had never found him particularly frightening before. "My Master is prepared to offer you power beyond your wildest imaginings-"

"That's awfully vague," pointed out Draco. "How come it's always 'power beyond your wildest imaginings' and never anything specific, like top-box tickets to the Quidditch World Cup and a yearlong subscription to Playwizard magazine? I mean, how about something I could *use*?"

"-power over weather," Wormtail continued, glaring as if he disliked being interrupted, "over the minds of other men, over dragons and other Outside Powers..."

*Dragons?* Draco looked slightly wistful. *Power over dragons...*

*Malfoy!*

*Oh, all right.*

"...Over life and death. He offers you a chance to share the Dark Throne with him and sit at his left hand."

"And all I have to do is what?" Draco snapped, a sharp edge to his voice. "Give up my soul?"

"Oh, no," said Wormtail. "You don't have to give up your soul. What would my Master want with your soul? Souls are useful only to demons, who have none of their own. No, my master wants your cooperation and your loyalty...that's all."

Draco turned to Harry, his arms crossed over his chest, and raised an eyebrow. "I'm just not finding this guy believable, Potter," he said. "Why do you think that is?"

Harry shrugged thoughtfully. "Well, he lacks credibility."

Draco turned back to Wormtail and smiled. It was the same creepy smile that had spooked Charlie the night before. Harry couldn't have known that, but he felt the back of his neck prickle as if something cold had touched him. "I'd have to say I agree with Potter," he said, his tone unpleasant. "I suggest you leave...and don't forget to let the door hit you in the ass on the way out of town. Of course, with a target that size..."

Wormtail looked stiff. "There's no reason to be insulting."

Draco snorted. "I think there's every reason to be insulting. You kidnapped a friend of mine and told her that unless she drank an illegal love potion, you would kill her. You as good as killed Harry's parents, tried to kill him, and oh, yes, not that long ago you tried to kill me as well. Now you tell me that either I go with you to serve your Master, or else - well, you won't say what else, but knowing you it's probably going to involve - big surprise here - *killing*. So far you have done nothing to endear yourself to me, and much that has annoyed me profoundly. In fact, the way I look at it, you can just sleep on the couch from now on, because I don't think this relationship has a future."

Wormtail's expression darkened. "Are you saying that you won't

come willingly?"

Draco smiled politely. "I'm sorry, what part of 'sod off, you unspeakable fat git' didn't you understand?"

Wormtail looked as if he hadn't heard this. He was staring at Draco, and there was a look in his eyes that Harry didn't like at all. "You are the Heir," he said to Draco. "There is none other like you. As such, you are entitled to certain...special treatment."

Draco looked both fascinated and repelled. "What sort of special treatment?"

Three times I must ask you," Wormtail he said, as if this were something he had learned by rote. "Three times I must ask you if you will come willingly before I can use force against you. For the last time: will you come with me to serve my Master?"

Draco looked at Harry, and then back at Wormtail, and shook his head. "No, I won't."

Wormtail's mouth curled into an ugly smile. "Then I will have to force you."

"*Force* me?" Draco's face took on the tense, slightly maniacal look that Harry knew meant he was now not just very but extremely angry. He held out his left hand and the sword flew from the grass and landed in his grasp. He swung it forward, the blade toward Wormtail. "Come anywhere *near* me, and I'll introduce you to the pointy end of Clarence."

"Clarence?" Wormtail said, blinking.

"You named your *sword*?" Harry said.

"So?" said Draco.

"You named it *Clarence*?"

"Well, it was either that or give it a really overwrought name like



Durendal or Greyswandir or Drynwyn and why are we talking about this right now?"

Wormtail was chuckling. "Ah, yes," he said. "The Living Blade. Made of demon metal, by demons. Rather a large weapon for a youngster like yourself, don't you think, young Draco? Wouldn't you prefer a slingshot?"

Harry's glanced at Draco, and saw the flicker of confusion in his eyes. *He's just bluffing you, Harry thought. Stall him. Sirius should be here any minute. He's supposed to come through after me.*

Wormtail was still smiling as, slowly, he got to his feet. The fire about them died as suddenly as it had sprung up and Harry shivered - not from real cold, since he could feel neither cold nor heat in the state he was in, but from apprehension. "You might know," Wormtail said, "that there have been three Living Blades throughout history. Yours, that was once my master's. Godric Gryffindor had one, although his was not demonic in origin. And there was a third. It no longer exists. It was melted down by the Dark Lord to make another weapon." He raised his right hand, and Harry saw the moonlight gleam off the polished surface of his metal hand. "*This* weapon," said Wormtail, and suddenly his hand shot forward, the fingers lengthening swiftly, braiding themselves together, melting and reforming into a razor-edged, glittering, *living* blade, almost an exact image of the sword Draco held, although its hilt was Wormtail's wrist.

Harry felt his eyes widen, and shot a glance toward Draco, who looked equally astonished, but remained very still, his eyes fixed on Wormtail. "If you wanted to kill me," he said tightly, "you could just crush the Charm. Slytherin wants me alive. You won't kill me."

Wormtail shrugged, brandishing his elongated sword-arm, which gleamed like the carapace of a metallic insect. "He wants you alive," he agreed. "But he never said anything about wanting you *intact*. You'll serve his purpose just as well missing your arms or your legs. Or so I have been given to understand."

Draco didn't look afraid, just furious. "Fine," he said. "Come and get me then."

Wormtail lunged towards him just as Draco raised his sword, and the two blades hissed more than clanged as they struck against each other. Harry saw Draco's eyes flick towards him quickly, saw him give an infinitesimal rueful smile, as if to say *don't worry about it*, before he turned back to the fight.

*Goddamn it*, Harry raged inwardly, *I feel like a complete useless berk. Sirius, where are you?* And then, as he watched, his eyes widened in amazement...*Sirius....you should see this...you wouldn't believe it...*

Harry suddenly remembered the fencing-room back at Malfoy Mansion, its walls lined with terrifying weapons, and Lucius Malfoy tossing him a sword. *Let's test your mettle, boy*. He hated to admit it, but apparently Lucius' training of his son had shown results. Draco could *fight*. Harry knew very little about sword fighting, it had never interested him particularly, but Quidditch had given him a good eye for skill, and Draco had skill. He moved faster than Harry would have thought it possible for him to move, and as far as Harry could tell, he looked like he was having a good time doing it.

Wormtail, quite obviously, couldn't fight, but it didn't seem to matter. His sword-hand was doing all the work for him, leaping, cutting, thrusting and lunging with an eye-dazzling swiftness. Wormtail followed along after the sword's direction like a hapless tin can tied to a car bumper. His eyes widened as the sword made a wide sweeping swing towards Draco -- which was blocked - then nearly tripped as the blade cut at Draco's legs. Draco jumped up and over the blade and turned to face Wormtail, holding Slytherin's sword in front of him. "You're *pathetic*," he hissed. "And you're going to get tired first. Then what? Is your arm going to rip itself off and come after me?"

Wormtail's eyes widened as if this hadn't occurred to him.

"Let's find out," said Draco, and slashed at him hard with Slytherin's sword. Wormtail yelled and jumped back, bleeding from a cut on his shoulder. He appeared to be trying to back away, but the sword wouldn't let him; it leaped forward, cutting at Draco with renewed vigor. Draco ducked, but not quite quickly enough to miss the blow entirely, and the tip of Wormtail's blade opened a wide gash along his cheekbone. Blood splattered down onto his white shirt.

*Are you all right?* Harry thought at him quickly. *Can you do this?*

*I can do it for a while. He can't fight, but that sword can. Where's Sirius?*

Harry tried to keep the despair out of his tone. *I don't know.*

Wormtail had landed another blow, this time on Draco's arm. It hadn't pierced through the thick leather of his jacket, but Draco looked irritated anyway. "Bastard," he hissed under his breath, and swung his sword down hard. Wormtail rolled aside, missing the blow by inches. He was drenched in sweat now, his bald head glistening, his pudgy little eyes bulging with fear. He looked as if he would have liked to be anywhere else, but the Living Blade wouldn't let him go. Harry watched in amazement as Wormtail was wrenched to his feet and hurled again towards Draco, eyes screwed nearly shut in terror. Draco made a movement with his sword that seemed to Harry both incredibly tiny and incredibly quick, and Wormtail jerked back, bleeding from the wrist. They were standing nearly at the edge of the quarry now. *Be careful*, Harry thought at Draco. *I'm always careful---*

Draco's thought broke off as Wormtail lunged at him again, arm outstretched. Draco struck at his blade and the thrust went high and wide; Wormtail half-fell forward, the point of his blade jamming itself in a crack between two rocks. Harry saw him heave back with his shoulders, and it took a moment for him to realize that Wormtail's Living Blade was stuck fast, and that he couldn't move.

Draco turned, saw what had happened, and raised his sword, the bright blade glinting like moonlight seen in a mirror. Wormtail made a strangled sound of terror; he was gripping his right wrist with his left hand, pulling hard, but to no avail.

Draco looked up at Harry and Harry saw that he was very white in the dim light. His eyes asked a question, and Harry answered it, keeping his gaze steady:

*Finish him.*

Harry could sense Draco's uneasiness when he replied: *You mean kill him?*

Yes.

*I've never killed anyone before.*

*You haven't?*

A bright flash of Draco's irritation popped like a flashbulb behind Harry's eyes. *Thanks for the vote of confidence, Potter. No, I've never killed anyone!*

*Sorry...*

Draco raised the sword again, and Wormtail screamed out loud. Harry saw Draco wince and step back a little, and Wormtail, seeing his movement, jerked hard on his caught arm - and with a rending sound, it freed itself. Released, Wormtail stumbled backward, throwing out his hands-

*Malfoy, watch out!* Harry thought sharply - but it was too late, one of Wormtail's flailing hands caught Draco in the stomach. With a surprised "ooph," he stumbled backward - and lost his footing on the edge of the rock.

Paralyzed with shock and horror, Harry saw Draco's eyes widen in surprise, his hands flying up, the sword tumbling out of his hand as he fell backwards and out of view.

A moment later, Harry heard the splash as he struck the water.

He heard Draco's voice in his head. *I can't swim, for starters.*

Harry began to run. He was barely conscious of Wormtail, his face contorted with horror at what he had done, Disapparating; was utterly unconscious that there were footsteps behind him, someone running nearly as fast as he was. He was conscious only of the steady light in the back of his head, which was no longer steady but had begun to flicker like a blown candleflame.

*This can't be happening.*

He reached the edge of the quarry, flung himself down, and gazed down at the still and unmoving black water. There was no sign of anything, of any life, not even a ripple on the surface.

"Malfoy!" he yelled, knowing it was useless, hearing only silence. "Malfoy!" He tipped his head back despairingly, looked up at the stars - "*Sirius, where are you?*"

\*\*\*

In the bedroom back at Malfoy Mansion, Hermione suddenly felt Harry's hand tighten convulsively on hers, his fingers gripping her wrist so tightly it was agony. "Harry," she whispered, leaning towards him, "Harry -"

His muscles tensed abruptly, his back arcing up off the bed, his hand tearing out of hers. Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth. "Harry - what's going *on* -? " She dropped down next to him, tried to take him by the shoulders, but he wrenched away from her, flailing out with his arms. She caught at one of his hands, clutching it tightly, and reached out with her other hand to push the sweaty black hair out of his eyes. *Where is he? What's happening to him?* "It's all right, Harry," she whispered. "You're fine, nothing can hurt you -"

Harry wrenched his head to the side, and shouted - the first sound she had heard him make since he'd been put under the spell -

*"Sirius, where are you?"*

Hermione looked around wildly. *Sirius-- I have to get Sirius*, she thought. *But I don't want to leave Harry-* She got to her feet, letting go of Harry's hand reluctantly, and backed away from the bed, her eyes fixed on Harry. He was still twitching as if he were having a nightmare. *Oh, God, is he all right? Nothing can hurt him; Lupin said nothing could hurt him -*

She hesitated, staring at him - and then she felt it vanish.

*It.* That feeling in the pit of her stomach, the cold anchor that had lodged itself there, that feeling that had been there every second of every minute of every day since she had swallowed the potion Wormtail had given her.

It was gone.

*Gone.*

Hermione clutched at her stomach for a moment, not daring to believe it. *It's gone*, she thought wildly, *the spell's off me*. And then, more slowly. *It's gone. The spell's off me.*

*Draco....*

She bolted towards the bedroom door, flinging it open with such force that she heard the hinges creak, and tore out into the hallway, screaming at the top of her lungs, screaming for Sirius, even though she knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that if the spell was off her, it was already too late.

#### References:

1)"Yeah," he interrupted her, with a faint smile, "you know, I'm just going by 'Draco' now." Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

2) A beat, a feint in quarte, a feint in sixte, and a lunge veering off into an attack on the opponent's sword hand. This is very famously Prince Corwin's classic diarming move in Nine Princes in Amber.

3) A smug scholar is only a fool, but a smug swordsman is a dead man. I haven't the faintest. It seems to be a saying. If you know its origin, let me know.

4) Durendal, Greyswandir, Dyrnwyn -- Durendal is the sword of Roland in the Chanson de Roland, Greyswandir, again, belongs to Nine Princes in Amber, and Dyrnwyn was one of the Thirteen Treasures of Britain collected by Merlin.

Draco Sinister

## Chapter Nine - The River

The corridor was stone, lit with the light of smokeless torches at uneven intervals, their sconces carved in the shapes of serpents. The blue-eyed woman paid them no attention as she hurried down the hall, her feet making no noise on the bare stone floor.

She paused in front of a door, rapped on it once. It was opened by a red-headed woman with tired eyes which lit with a dark blue glow when she saw who *had* knocked. *"Rowena," she said. "You came...he's been asking for you."*

*"Is he dying, Helga?"*

*"I don't know. One of those snakes he's endlessly playing with, using in his experiments...it bit him on the arm. I've tried antivenom spells, but nothing seems to be working."*

*"I want to see him."*

*Helga sighed. "Go on in."*

*Inside the room, Rowena stood for a long time, looking at the young man in the bed. His eyes were closed, shadows like black half-moons under his eyes, his head propped up on pillows. She could see the dark mark of the bite on the inside of his forearm, black and venomous-looking. She didn't move, not sure if he was asleep or not.*

*At last he opened his eyes and looked at her. "You can come near me," he said. "It's snake venom, I'm not contagious."*

*"I didn't know if you'd want me to come near you," she said, and went to sit on the stool next to his bed. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. His silver hair was plastered to his head with sweat, his gray eyes bright with fever. Sickness had made him look younger, somehow undefended.*

*"Who would have sent for you, if not me?" he asked.*



*"Nobody sent me for me. I heard you were ill--"*

*"Very commendable of you to take pity on me. What does Godric have to say about this?"*

*She expelled a breath. "Godric doesn't know. How's your wife?"*

*He glared at her. "She's not my wife. I told you that."*

*"No, just another of these creatures you've created. What did you call her...?"*

*"A veela," said the man in the bed impatiently. "She's not my wife but she's obedient, she's loving, she's all the things you aren't. And she's giving me an heir."*

*"Yes, and when you get her angry, she grows an enormous beak and tries to poke out your eyes."*

*"No experiment is perfect," he said, almost sounding amused, and tried to straighten up on the pillows. "The wolf-men, though, I'm especially proud of what I've done with them."*

*"You don't think it's cruel? Creating these races of creatures that aren't men, aren't animals, but are something else instead? What is going to happen to them, after you're gone?"*

*"I'm not planning on ever being gone."*

*"Oh, Lord, not this again. You have to stop this, all of it, these horrible experiments with the Dark Arts. You can't call up the powers of Hell and expect no repercussions. Be sensible."*

*"If you just came here to lecture me, you might as well leave."*

*"Fine," said Rowena, gathering her cloak up about her, but he suddenly whipped his hand forward and seized onto her wrist, making her wince. "It's not fair," he said. "Since we were children, who did we ever trust besides each other?"*

*"But I don't trust you any more," she said tearfully, and he loosened his grip on her wrist, sliding his hand down, interlocking her fingers with his. His skin was burning hot with fever. "What do you want from me, Salazar?"*

*"I'm dying," he said. "But if you want me to live I will. Poison, disease, the wound of any battle - nothing will be able to hurt me. I'll make myself immortal for you."*

*She looked away, blinking hard. "People are not meant to live forever. Why don't you try doing something good with all your power, your knowledge? You could be a healer like Helga, you could put people back together instead of taking them apart and doing experiments on the pieces..."*

*He sat up then, staring at her, his gray eyes lit with a fever so intense they looked almost blue. "I could," he said. "I could, if you would help me. Stay with me, Rowena, and I swear, I promise, I'll abandon the Dark Arts, I'll burn my books, destroy my experiments -" he broke off, drawing her towards him by their interlocked hands. She let herself be pulled down on the bed beside him and leaned into him, her face against the hollow of his shoulder. Through the link that bound them she could feel that the weight of her against his skin was causing him excruciating pain. She also knew he did not want her to move away. The poison in him was black and burning. She found that she was afraid for him and so, for the moment, no longer afraid of him. "I'll tell you something," he said. "I let that snake bite me."*

*"Salazar, why?"*

*"I thought if I was dying you might come to see me. Don't laugh - I was right. Here you are."*

*"I wasn't going to laugh."*

*"And I'm not going to die. Not now that you're here. Don't leave me," he said, and she could feel his rapid heartbeat through the bedclothes. He reached his right hand up, touched her face, ran his*

*thumb along her cheekbone, down to her mouth. "You're the only thing that matters to me, the only thing I could never give up."*

*"Yes, you would," she said. "You would give me up me along with all the rest."*

*"Not you. Never."*

*"We'll see."*



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"*Sirius!*" shouted Harry. "*Sirius, where are you?*"

There was no answer, but at that moment, he became aware of the sound of running feet behind him, and turned to see Ron - still in his paisley pajamas, barefoot, but running as fast as his long legs could carry him. He was holding his wand.

He threw himself down next to Harry at the edge of the quarry. "What's going on?" he demanded, breathless.

"Malfoy fell in," said Harry tersely. "I can't do anything - Hermione sent me here as an Apparation. Ron, can you-"

But Ron was already kneeling upright, pointing his wand down into the quarry. "*Accio!*" he said firmly, and the water seemed to break open and turn itself inside out. Harry saw the water flash black and then silver, and then Draco's body flew up out of it, rose into the air, and landed between them on the grass, crumpled in on itself like an abandoned toy.

Ron looked at Harry. His face was very white in the moonlight, each freckle standing out like a separate ink dot. "Check his pulse."

"I can't. I can't touch anything."

Ron swore, and reached out to turn Draco over. Harry's heart sank. Draco's skin was blueish-white, not an encouraging color, and the lids of his shut eyes were purple. Against his livid skin, the scar on his left hand stood out, black as if it had been inked there. *Malfoy*, Harry thought experimentally, but he could not cast the thought outward; it echoed in emptiness, as if he had thrown a ball and found that there was no one there to catch it.

Ron pressed his fingers to Draco's throat, looked up and shook his head. "No pulse."

"No pulse?" Harry echoed in disbelief. "But he can't have been down there that long-"

"No pulse, that's what I said." To Harry's surprise, Ron then lifted his wand and placed the tip of it against Draco's chest. "*Suspiro*," he snapped.

Draco's chest jerked, and subsided.

Ron looked worried. "*Suspiro!*" he said again, jamming the tip of the wand harder into Draco's ribcage. This time Draco's body didn't move at all. He continued to lie there, his hair streaming blood and water, his chest unmoving. Harry suddenly recalled the first dead body he could remember seeing - Cedric's. Remembered looking at Cedric, and being sure he was dead, not knowing how he knew, but knowing. And it was the same thing now.

Insubstantial though he was, he felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. Felt a weird, panicky sort of feeling he had never felt before. No - he had felt it before, when, tied to the grave of Voldemort's dead father, he had seen Wormtail come at him with his knife, and Harry had felt a moment of primal panic, positive that he was about to lose a part of himself - an arm, a hand - that could never be replaced, that a wound was about to be inflicted on him from which he would never recover.

"Ron," he said, "*do something--*"

Looking desperate, Ron tried again. "*Suspiro vivicus*," he said, with emphasis. "*Suspiro vivicus totalus!*"

Nothing continued to happen. Draco lay there, looking cold and vulnerable and very, very dead.

Ron looked up at Harry, and Harry saw the shock in his blue eyes. "Harry..." Ron said unevenly, shivering in the cold night air. "He's dead."

Harry shook his head. "Try again."

"There's no point. He's dead. If he wasn't, he'd respond to the spell. His heart's not beating --"

"Drop your wand, Ron."

"What?"

"Put it down."

Ron did.

"Now, do exactly what I tell you." Ron was looking at Harry as if he were insane, and Harry was none too sure that he wasn't. He felt as if he were gripping very tightly onto something very slippery. Felt, in fact, as if he might lapse into hysterics at any moment, but knew he couldn't afford to. "All right," he said, enunciating each word with perfect precision. "Open his mouth."

Ron did it, looking doubtfully sideways at Harry as he did so. "Yikes. He's freezing cold."

"Tilt his head back. Right. Like that. Now put your mouth on his and breath into his lungs-"

Ron jerked back. "*What?*"

"*JUST DO IT!*"

"Okay, okay."

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"There must be something I can do."

"You can get out of the cell, Sirius," said Lupin, who was lying on his back with his hands covering his face. Every once in a while he would groan and curl in on himself, his arms wrapped around his midsection. Sirius couldn't tell exactly where the pain originated - everywhere, he had a feeling.

"Look, Moony, I'll just transform if I have to."

"I'm not sure that'll help. Damn," added Lupin softly, flinching as he

took his hands away from his face and glared at his fingertips, from which razor-sharp nails had sprouted. "What's going on?"

"Does it *feel* like the Change?" Sirius asked.

Lupin shook his head. "As if someone took the Change and stretched it out...and out...and out. It *never* takes this long, you know that -" he broke off on a wince, looked up at Sirius. "Sirius...what if I get stuck this way? In between?"

"That's all right," said Sirius, patting him a bit awkwardly on the shoulder. "I hear teeth and fingernails are being worn long this season."

Lupin actually laughed, a short gasp cut off by another spasm of pain. He winced and turned away from Sirius to face the wall.

"That does it," muttered Sirius, and fumbled in his pocket for his wand, casting his mind back to Hogwarts; he'd been with Lupin before when he Changed, but usually it was - though painful - immediate, and anti-pain spells had never been-

Sirius paused.

His pocket was empty.

Sirius swore. He was even better at swearing than Draco, although he did it less.

He heard a chortle, and swung his head around to see the demon's gloating face pressed against the bars of its cell. "Only an idiot would stay locked in a cell with a werewolf," it said. "But only their heir to the throne of a kingdom of idiots would stay locked in a cell with a werewolf being Called by Dark powers."

Sirius glared at it, wanting nothing more at that moment than to leap across the space that separated them and bash its gloating face in. "If you don't shut up," he told it in measured tones, "I'll finish what Harry started on you."



The demon bared its teeth at him and hissed. "You know nothing," it snarled at him.

"I know you tried to kill my godson."

The demon's eyes whirled, concentric circles of black and red. "I was not trying to *kill* him," it began indignantly, and then its red eyes widened and Sirius whirled around to see the wolf at his back.

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*Harry*, Draco tried to say, but his own voice made no sound. He opened his eyes, and for a moment wondered if he had gone blind. He could see nothing but blackness.

Holding out his hands, he shuffled forward, into the darkness. There was no sound at all, no scent, no feel of heat or cold. He had always wondered if death was nothingness, and found that idea comforting. Now he realized how terrible nothingness could be.

"Harry!" he called out, This time he heard his own voice, a soft echo. He followed the sound of it until he heard another sound - a soft trickle, like falling water.

He threw his hand out, and this time it struck something hard. A wall. Feeling along the wall, he drew closer and closer to the sound of the water. At last he saw a narrow band of light and realized it was the end of a tunnel.

*They always said there'd be light at the end of the tunnel*, he thought grimly. *But someone this isn't what I was expecting.*

He squeezed his way through the narrow gap in the stones, and found himself standing on the bank of a swift-moving river. The bank he stood on was green and verdant, but the opposite side of the bank was gray and dry with dust.

He stepped down into the river. Icy water swirled around his ankles. It was like wading through molasses. He glanced down, and shouted out loud in terror -- there were *faces* under the water. White, staring

faces with big, froglike eyes that stared up at him accusingly.

With a hoarse yell, he started to back away, but it was too late. A wet hand seized his ankle, long white fingers scrabbling for a hold on his trousers. A head, dark and sleek as a seal's, broke the water, and slowly, a woman rose to her feet before him. Her hair was long and dark, streaming water, and her long, velvet gown clung to her in soaking folds.

"*Salazar?*" she said.

Draco froze. And stared. And as she gazed at him, her blue eyes filled with a terrible sort of indefinable longing and fear, he realized that he knew her voice. It was the voice that had screamed in his head when the dementors got near him, crying out, asking him what he had done. "Rowena," he said, knowing now who she was. "Rowena Ravenclaw?"

Her eyes filled with tears. At that moment, two other heads broke through the water, and two other figures rose to join her. Both were as wet as she was, and both stared at him as she had - one, a dark-haired man, gazed in anger and loathing, while the woman beside him, small and round with weed-streaked red hair, looked sad. Godric, Draco thought, and Helga.

The dark-haired man - Godric Gryffindor - stepped in front of Rowena as if to protect her, his eyes fixed on Draco. They were full of hate. "So at last you are dead," he said. "We have waited a thousand years for someone to give you the punishment you deserve and to end your worthless, stolen existence --"

Godric looked rather as if he meant to go on in this vein for quite some time, so Draco interrupted him. "I'm not who you think I am," he said. "I'm not Salazar Slytherin."

The three looked doubtful.

"*Look* at me," insisted Draco.

Rowena, who had had her hand over her mouth, lowered it slowly.

"Godric...He cannot be Salazar. He is only a child."

They all stared at him. Draco was indignant. "I'm sixteen. I'll be seventeen in a few weeks."

"I wouldn't put money on *that*," said Godric, quite unkindly.

Draco glared at him. It struck him that he did not like Godric. It also struck him that in order to free himself from the Tragic and Destructive Cycle of History Repeating Itself, it might be wise to *try* to like Godric.

But he didn't want to like Godric. Godric, he thought, was a prat.

"You're dead, boy," said Godric with immense satisfaction, cementing Draco's dislike of him on the spot. "Face it -- you'll never be seventeen."

There was something about the smug way he said it that reminded Draco of Harry. He could now begin to see how Godric resembled Harry, a grown-up Harry. A grown-up Harry who had spent a lot of time working out with heavy weights. His arms were *huge*. Draco was glad Godric didn't seem to be able to cross the river either. He didn't know what it would feel like to be punched in the face in the afterlife, and didn't much care to find out.

Rowena was still looking at Draco with a torrent of mixed emotions crossing her face. "You *sound* like Salazar," she said. "And you look just like him..."

"I'm his Heir," said Draco, seeing no reason not to divulge this information.

"Then you are cursed," said Godric. "And fortunate to have died."

Draco looked at him irritably. "Don't you ever say anything nice?"

"*Godric*," said Helga, in a warning sort of tone. Godric looked from Rowena to Helga, and did a sort of little shuffle with his feet. "Well, he *is* cursed," he muttered. "If he is truly Salazar's Heir..." He turned

on Draco. "How do you know you're the Heir of Slytherin?" he demanded.

"Because Slytherin said so," Draco snapped.

"He *said* so?" breathed Rowena, her eyes widening. As with Godric, intense emotion seemed to make her form clearer, too. Draco could now see how much she looked like Hermione. It was very unnerving. He had often played fantasies through in his head where he happened to bump into Hermione unexpectedly in various places. The afterlife, however, had not been one of them. "You mean he is alive - he walks among you, as a man?"

"He's alive. I've seen him. But he isn't very powerful. He doesn't have a Source."

Rowena's spirit had begun pacing in a tight circle. "That won't last. Salazar is clever. He'll find himself a Source. Has he tried to use you?" She glanced up, shook her head. "No, he wouldn't. Not his Heir...he'll try to find someone else." She whirled, looked at Draco. "He must be prevented from returning to his full power," she said. "I shudder to think of the destruction, the despair he could wreak. That is why we imprisoned him in the first place --"

"He told Hermione he shut himself away from the world--"

"He lied," said Rowena definitively. "He didn't want you to think he was weak, did not want you to know how his eventual defeat was accomplished. Helga and I could not kill him, but we rendered him powerless." She raised her eyes, looked at Draco. "As you must. If I tell you how he can be defeated, will you do it?"

"Look, I'd love to defeat Slytherin for you, but there is a slight problem with that plan," said Draco resignedly. "I'm dead."

"You are *not* dead until you have crossed this river," said Rowena fiercely. "The green bank is the bank of the living, and the gray bank is the bank where the spirits of the murdered and unavenged dead roam. You are betwixt and between here, child."

He looked at her. "But *you're* dead," he pointed out. "And isn't the river supposed to make you forget...?"

"This is not Lethe the Forgetful," said Rowena, "but the river where the spirits of those neither truly alive nor truly dead reside. We cannot all die until Salazar dies, but neither are we alive. It is a terrible fate, one he has doomed us to with charms and spells."

Draco was curious. "Did he murder you all?"

"Not exactly," said Rowena. "Salazar did in fact murder Godric - I'm sorry, Godric dear, but you know it's true--"

"Bastard," muttered Godric. "He snuck up behind me."

Rowena shook her head. "I suppose Salazar thought it was self-defense, in some twisted way," she added, in Draco's direction. "We had all realized that we must take steps to protect ourselves against him. Together, we forged a magical weapon, each part crafted by one of us - Salazar must have discovered our plans. He struck first at Godric. Then he attacked us - Helga and me. We were ready for him. We put up quite a fight, but he was too powerful. He struck down Helga as she fought against him, then came for me. But at the last, he hesitated -" Rowena's voice shook slightly. "And I was able to work our spell upon him. He was rendered powerless, but the drain on my Magid powers was so great that it killed me. Thus we are all here."

"And so you want him dead," reasoned Draco.

Rowena shook her head. "If he can be killed, it is beyond my knowledge to say how. I can tell you only how to imprison him and strip him of his power. And for that, you need the other three Heirs, and their Keys. Tell me, do they yet live, the other Heirs of the Founders?"

Draco hesitated, looking around at the green bank and the dead gray bank opposite. "Don't you know? Surely there must be other...spirits here who have died since you, who could tell you --"

Rowena shook her head. "Without a living person to regard us, we are without form, almost without thought. Time has no meaning here, speech almost none."

"You can't talk to each other?" Draco asked, revolted. "That voice told me this wasn't Hell...but that sounds like Hell to me."

To his surprise, it was Godric who replied. "There is a difference," he said. "Hell is forever. We are here only until we are avenged."

Helga had stepped away from the others, and turned back now, her dark eyes wide. "There are spirits upon the bank who would speak to the boy," she said.

Draco glanced behind her in surprise. The bank looked empty to him, gray and barren. "There's no one there."

"You cannot see them," said Rowena. "They are the truly dead. Only living blood can unlock their tongues."

"They say," said Helga, "that you are the son of Lucius Malfoy, and that they knew your father."

Draco glanced down at himself. His shirt was stiff with blood, but it had dried. He looked at Godric, who wore on his hip a sword that was the twin of Harry's. A millennium in the waters of the dead river did not appear to have rusted it. "Cut my hand," Draco said, and with a fierce and nasty grin, Godric took his sword and cut a thin jagged line across the back of Draco's knuckles. "You enjoyed that far too much," said Draco, taking his hand back.

Godric merely grinned.

Draco waded through the water to join Helga at the bank. His hand was bleeding freely now. He flung it out, sending a spray of scarlet drops flying onto the gray river bank.

He heard a sound, as if a thousand breaths were drawn at once. The riverbank seemed to surge upward, and on it appeared a thousand, a hundred thousand, a thousand thousands of twisted, grayish,

translucent forms appeared before him. He had never imagined such a crowd, never imagined such a number of people. The huddled, struggling mass stretched as far as his eyes could see, and beyond.

*I never thought death had undone so many*, he thought.

"Undone," whispered a woman's voice. Gray and shadowy like all the rest, she knelt on the river bank. Where his own blood had splashed across her chest, pigment was spreading like spilled watercolor paint. He watched as her long hair turned red, her eyes green. She held out her hand to catch the hand of the kneeling figure beside her, spreading the color to him, too.

He was a tall man with dark untidy hair and glasses, and his eyes, too, were dark. Draco fought back a gasp. Even if Draco hadn't seen the pictures that Sirius kept on his desk, even if he hadn't seen their faces in old Hogwarts yearbooks, he would have known who these two were.

He was looking at Harry's parents.

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"Cross your hands. Put then on his chest and push down, hard."

"Okay."

"Harder than that."

"I'm going to break his ribs, doing this -"

"You're trying to get his heart started, who cares if you break his ribs? Do it again."

Another voice. "What's going on?"

Harry looked up. "Oh, hell. Ginny -"

"What's wrong with Draco?" Her voice wavered. "Is he dead?"

Ron looked up. "Maybe she should take over?"

"No, you're stronger," said Harry positively. "And don't *stop*, Ron, you're supposed to be breathing for him, come on --"

"You've lost it, Harry. He's *dead*."

"*Do it!*" said Harry and Ginny together, and Ron complied.

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Hermione bolted down the corridors that led to the dungeon, skidding on the uneven stone flooring, taking the corners with a reckless abandon that caught up to her when, rounding a corner, she slipped on an object that lay on the floor and fell headlong, slamming her knee into the ground. The pain was sharp and immediate and she rolled over, clutching her arm, scrambling up to her feet, and looked down to see what she had slipped on-

A wand. It looked like Sirius' wand. She reached down to retrieve it, and nearly fell over again when a bloodcurdling howl split the underground air. It was like being hit in the face with an ice-cold wave of wind or water; like night and cold and loneliness made audible, and terrifying.

Lupin.

Forgetting the wand, she started to run again, limping a little now, towards the sound of the howling. She rounded another corner, stumbled, and came to the gate that blocked off the dungeons. She wrenched it open and ran inside, calling for Sirius.

"I'm here," came a terse voice from a cell at the end of the corridor.

Hermione ran towards it - and came up short.

Sirius was in the cell, backed against the opposite wall - and between him and the cell door was a wolf. A wolf the size of a small pony, brindled gray and silver, lips pulled back from its teeth, snarling,



ears laid flat back against its head.

*Not it*, she reminded herself. *He. It's Lupin. You've seen him change before.*

But surely, when he had changed before, he hadn't been quite so....large? Or so ferocious-looking?

"Sirius," she hissed, "change into your animal form - you said he's only a danger to humans!"

"Tried that," said Sirius shortly. "Didn't work. Hermione-"

"Don't tell me to get out of here, I'm not going to go and leave you here to be *eaten*!" she snapped hotly.

"He won't eat me-" Sirius began, then broke off as the wolf emitted another blood-curdling snarl. "Well," he amended, edging slightly farther away from the wolf, "if he did, he'd be very sorry afterward."

"Oh, he'll eat you all right," the demon interrupted. "As soon as the Call becomes strong enough. I give you...five minutes."

Hermione ignored this. "Sirius - there must be something-"

"The Lycanthe," said Sirius quickly. "That silver thing of Draco's - that used to be a Portkey - I need that. Can you Summon it for me?"

Hermione already had her wand in her hand. "*Accio* Lycanthe!"

There was a short silence. She waited, heart pounding, the snarl of the wolf in her ears, Sirius' deadly silence nearly as bad. A sudden mental picture of Harry came to her, standing on the field during the First Task, hand outstretched for his Firebolt, and waiting, waiting...

*Clink.*

The Lycanthe flew towards her, ricocheting off the bars of the cell opposite, and Hermione reached up to catch it. Her fingers closed

around it; she turned back to Sirius --

A blackness so intense it was blinding flashed behind her eyes. She staggered, felt her back hit the stone wall behind her, nearly fell. Darkness flooded her vision.

And then came light.

In quick succession, a series of images raced across the back of her eyelids. She saw a castle surrounded by thorns, a great glass Orb in which flame trembled, a table on which rested a cup, a dagger, and a scabbard, and the polished surface of a mirror which reflected only darkness.

Her vision cleared and she was suddenly back in the dungeon, staring through the bars of the cage at Sirius and the werewolf, still locked in their frightful staring contest. Her knees felt weak and there was a buzzing in her ears, but she knew what she had to do.

She heard Sirius yelling her name, but ignored it. Instead, she strode up to the unlocked cell door, flung it open, and walked inside. She did not feel at all afraid, not even when the wolf turned from snarling at Sirius to face her, not when it drew its lips back from its teeth, its eyes narrowing, muscles tensing -

"Hermione, *get out!*" she heard Sirius shout despairingly, and then she raised her hand with the silver Lycanthe in it and held it out in front of the werewolf.

The werewolf cringed back and let out an unearthly, whimpering howl.

Hermione took a deep breath, and raised the Lycanthe higher. "*Tutamen mali intus,*" she cried, directing the light of the Lycanthe at the werewolf as if it were a wand. "*Cum monstrum colloquor, repulsus! Repulsus!*"

The werewolf stiffened - its eyelids drooped, its limbs trembled - and then it crashed to the ground in a heap and lay still.

Hermione gasped, and the burning light in the back of her mind vanished, like a light switch flicked off.

Shaking, she let her arm fall to her side and looked up at Sirius.

He was white as his shirt, staring at her. "What did you *do*? And how--?"

"I don't know," she whispered, staring back at him, and then, recalling why she was there, reached out to seize at his hand, which was icy cold, and started dragging him towards the door. "Sirius - you have to come - it's about Harry and Draco..."

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Heart pounding, Draco turned to face Harry's parents, feeling somehow that facing them directly was the least he could do. His eyes fastened on Harry's father - who hardly even looked like anyone's father, he seemed so young, a barely-aged version of Harry. Of course, he had been only five years older than Harry was now when he had died.

Draco felt a chill go through him.

James Potter raised his eyes to Draco's and they were not green as Harry's were, but black. He said, "I'm sorry I interrupted your conversation."

"Oh," said Draco. "Oh. That's - that's all right."

Color and life was coming into the Potters' faces even as Draco looked at them, the woman straightening, her cheeks flushing, her eyes fixed on Draco. But it was the man who spoke first.

"You are only the second living person we have ever seen in this place," said James. "And that you would be Lucius Malfoy's son - that seems a very strange chance. I suppose I should tell you that your father and I are old enemies."

"That's all right," said Draco. "My father and I are old enemies as

well."

The spirit of Lily Potter tugged at her husband's sleeve. James looked down at her, then back at Draco, and Draco braced himself, knowing what James was about to say.

"If you're Lucius' son, you must go to Hogwarts. And if you go to Hogwarts - do you know our son? His name is-"

"Harry," Draco finished. "Harry Potter."

Lily pushed forward. She was standing in front of James now. "So you do know him?" Her voice was light and wavering and very pretty.

"Yes, I - he - Everyone knows Harry Potter," said Draco. *What are you doing?* said a little voice in the back of his head. *Tell them more; tell them you know him well, that he's nearly your brother, that he's your friend - and more than that - that he's your enemy - because he's that as well.*

*I can't*, he said back. *I just...can't.*

"Everyone knows him," Draco said again, defeated. "He's famous."

"Yes," said James. "That's what the last living person we talked to said. But he knew very little else." He seemed to sigh. "There is no time in this place. An hour could be a minute, a moment a year. I could not believe it when he told us that Harry was eleven years old." He raised his black eyes to Draco. "If he is at school he must still be a child...how old is he now?"

Draco couldn't look at him. "My age. Sixteen."

"Please," Lily interrupted. "Could you tell us about him? Just a little bit?"

Draco looked at her, and saw how his blood had brought her back to an almost lifelike appearance. Her face had come into clearer focus, her hair, flaming red, almost the same lovely shade as Ginny's. The

green eyes that were Harry's looked at him, entreating, begging him for something he didn't think he could give.

He cleared his throat. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she said rapidly. "Is he happy? What does he do on an ordinary day? What is he like?"

Draco found himself looking down at the transparent, rushing river, wishing he could just disappear into it.

"I - well, I don't really know him that well, and -"

Lily gave an echoing, disappointed cry. "But you go to school with him - you must at least know what he's *like*?"

He glanced up and looked at Lily, and then at James, which meant that James snapped into clearer focus too, looking terribly, eerily like Harry, and both the spirits were looking at him with hopeful expectation --

*Oh, God, this is horrible, Draco thought. What can I say? Why couldn't I be Ron or Sirius, someone who actually knows him, someone he cares about, I'm the last person he would want talking to his parents. The LAST person.*

"Harry is..." He looked away. "He plays Quidditch for Gryffindor," he said. "He was their youngest Seeker in a hundred years. He'll be team captain next year, and..."

Draco trailed off. He could tell by the way the spirits were looking at him that this was not the kind of information they wanted.

He felt speechless, which rarely happened. *If it were me*, he thought, *what would I want to hear?* But that floored him, never having been a parent (fortunately, he thought) he couldn't even imagine. So instead he tried to call up Harry in his mind - not the way Harry *looked*, but the way Harry *was*, the memory of what it was like to think the way Harry did, to very nearly *be* Harry.

He shut his eyes. "My father," he said, hearing his own voice echo beneath the susurrations of rushing water, the impatient rustling of the spirits. "My father used to talk a lot about honor, the honor of our family, the honor of our bloodline and our name. But in my life, I never saw my father do an honorable thing. I thought honor was just a term, like lineage or patrimony, that meant you'd been around for a while. But it's a real thing, to have honor. And Harry has it. Harry is the first person you would want on your side in a fight, and the last person who would ever do an untruthful or an underhanded thing. Harry has more integrity than anyone else I have ever known."

The spirit of Lily Potter turned away from him, and buried her insubstantial face in her husband's insubstantial chest. Feeling as if he had said atrociously the wrong thing, Draco looked fearfully at James, who looked back at him, wavering and half-transparent, and put an arm around his crying wife. "You're a friend of his," he said. "Aren't you?"

"Sometimes," admitted Draco. "I'm *sorry*," he added, not exactly sure if he was apologizing, or simply expressing sorrow.

"Don't be," said James. "I understand."

And Draco rather thought that James did understand.

"You're fading," James went on, looking at Draco closely. "Someone is calling you back."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"No. It's a good thing. You can take a message with you."

"I can tell Harry that you-"

"No. Don't tell Harry you saw us. It will just cause him pain. There's a man called Sirius Black; he's Harry's godfather, you might have seen him picking up Harry at platform 9 3/4 at the end of term. Find him. Tell him to go into his vault at Gringott's and take from it what I gave him just before I died, and give it to Harry. I never told

him it was for Harry, but it is. Harry is the Heir of Gryffindor, he'll be needing it soon. And tell Sirius that I-" and then the ground jerked under Draco's feet and a soft implosion sent the world flying at his face like hurtling glass. He would have thrown his arms up to protect himself, but a tearing pain ripped through his chest, doubling him over, and he was coughing, coughing in great wrenching, shattering gasps, coughing and spitting water all over the wet dark grass of the Weasleys' back garden.

He blinked his eyes open. He was lying on his back, on the grass, under a black sky. Harry was hunched down by his shoulder, Ron beside him, very pale under his freckles, with the back of his wrist pressed against his mouth as if he were trying to keep himself from yelling or being sick. And on his other side was Ginny, with enormous eyes, who looked a degree worse than her brother - not just pale but with tear streaks on top of that.

Draco took a breath. He could hear his chest gurgling like a leaky radiator, and it hurt to breathe, but otherwise...

"You're *alive*," said Ginny, looking and sounding amazed. She turned to her brother. "Ron! You *did* it!"

"Mmppph," said Ron, still goggling at Draco as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

What's going on? Draco tried to say, but discovered that taking in the air that would allow him to talk made his chest hurt even more. He concentrated on breathing shallowly, and flicked his eyes towards Harry.

Hey, Potter...

Harry leaned forward so quickly that one of his insubstantial hands went through Draco's chest. Draco glared at him.

Harry looked contrite. *Sorry.*

*Never mind. What happened?*

*You drowned. Ron revived you.*

*He did what? How?*

Harry grinned. *Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Malfoy.*

*What?* Draco's eyes flicked over to Ron, widening. "Oh my God, how disgusting," he said, out loud, before he could help it. This sent him off into another spasm of coughing. When he recovered, he saw Ron glaring at him.

"Well, it was no picnic for me, either, you ungrateful git," he said. "At least you were dead for most of the experience. Now I just wish I was."

Draco coughed again. He had begun to feel as if he were coughing up his own lungs. He put a hand to his chest and sat up, which seemed to ease the pressure under his ribcage.

"Can you breathe properly?" asked Ginny anxiously, scooting up next to him, and putting a hand to his forehead. "You're still freezing." She brought her hand back, wet with water and blood from his cut cheek.

"I am freezing," Draco said, and reached to take his jacket off, but his fingers wouldn't obey him. He couldn't seem to make them work properly; they fumbled at the wet dragonhide leather, and let go.

"Let me," said Ginny, and helped him off with the jacket. She turned to her brother. "Ron, give me your pajama top."

Ron glared at her.

"Fine," she snapped. "either that, or I'll give him *my* pajama top."

"I'll take option number two," said Draco, through chattering teeth.

Ron sighed, and took his top off. He tossed it to Ginny, who proceeded to use it to dry Draco's hair. "We need to get you out of these wet clothes," she said.



At that, another coughing spasm doubled Draco over, and when he straightened up, it took him several moments to properly focus his eyes. For a moment, he couldn't tell Ron from Ginny, they both looked like wavery blobs, with Harry a darker sort of blob off to the right, which was disturbing to say the least. "Bugger," he said, and his voice sounded like a bubbling water cooler. "I can't see properly."

He was vaguely aware of the Ron-blob looking with alarm at the Ginny-blob, and then there was a soft \*pop\* as someone Apparated into the garden.

"*Sirius*," Draco heard Ron mutter under his breath, sounding relieved. "Thank God."

There was a thump and Sirius dropped down on his knees next on the grass next to Draco, who had begun shivering again, and with every shiver his vision blackened further. *I won't faint*, he thought crossly. *I won't*. He felt Sirius' fingers on his neck, checking his pulse, then a hand against his forehead, reminding him of his mother checking for fever.

"Hypothermic shock," he heard Sirius say calmly, "He'll be fine if we get him inside." Draco saw a blur as he turned. "Harry, I'm sending you back."

Draco heard Harry's voice from a distance. "All right," and then there was a gasp from Ron. Draco presumed this meant that Harry had vanished. Either that, or the spell had gone horribly awry and turned Harry into a newt. Either way, Draco wasn't sure he could get too worked up about it. Everything seemed as if it were being filtered down from a long way away. He felt Sirius' hand on his wrist, and then Ron's voice saying something about lung damage, and Ginny asking if he'd be all right.

"He'll be all right. I can fix him up if we get him inside." Sirius bent down to Draco. "I'm going to lift you up now. Brace yourself, all right?"

Draco nodded, and felt Sirius' hand slide under his back, the other under his knees, picking him up. He did not remember ever having been carried like that before, not by his father anyway, and was surprised to find he didn't mind it too much. He threw an arm around Sirius' neck, looked sideways, saw Ginny's white and worried face, the moon behind her, and then all the shapes of the world ran together like watercolor and Draco did something he had always sworn he would never do, and fainted.

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*Wham.*

Harry opened his eyes, feeling somewhat as if he had been struck head-on by the Hogwarts Express train and thrown about fifty feet into a patch of nettles. He blinked, focusing his eyes, and saw that he was back the armchair in the Malfoy family library, staring up at the ceiling, which was traced with a design of the constellations picked out in gold leaf.

It took him several tries, but he managed to sit up and flex his fingers. His whole body stung with pins and needles. He became aware of being watched, and turned his head sideways to see Hermione kneeling by the arm of his chair, looking at him with huge eyes.

"Hey," he said.

"You're all right," she said, and it was both a question and a statement.

He nodded.

"I never should have sent you through," she said colorlessly. "I *never* should have. I can't believe I did anything so stupid."

"Hermione -"

"I keep telling myself it wasn't really me," she went on in the same colorless voice. "I haven't *been* me for the last week or so. I would

never have done anything so idiotic. It's my job to keep you from doing stupid things, not aid you and abet you. What if something had happened to you, it would have been my fault and that would have killed me, Harry, it would have killed me."

She was still staring at him with the same huge eyes and he was suddenly reminded of the way she had looked at him after he'd faced that Hungarian Horntail his fourth year, remembered how she had gripped her face so tightly in fear for him that she had left deep fingernail marks on her skin. It had startled him at the time that anyone could care *that* much what happened to him; it startled him still. "Hermione-*don't*," he protested, a bit incoherently, and reached out for her.

She was up and off the floor and in his lap in less than a second, her arms wrapped around his neck. He buried his face against her, where her neck curved down into her shoulder. Her hair smelled like it always did, a smell that reminded him of Moroccan mint tea. He felt her chest hitch, and then she was crying against him, dryly and with a soundless sort of despair that alarmed him. What on earth...?

"Oh, Harry, I just can't believe it, and I'm sure you did everything you possibly could have. It's not your fault."

Harry pulled back and looked at her, confused. "What's not my fault?"

"Draco. He's dead, isn't he?"

Harry looked at her, profoundly startled. "How did you -"

"The love spell's off me," she said, simply. "I felt it go." The tears had started sliding down her face, and Harry thought she looked somehow as if she was trying to be calm for his sake, which was very Hermione in a way. "What happened?" she burst out finally, her voice breaking. "How did he-no, never mind, don't tell me, I don't want to know." She scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "Harry, I feel so guilty, this past few days all I've been wishing is for this stupid spell to be off me, and now it is, but I never wanted-"

"Hermione," said Harry kindly. "Shut up for a minute, okay? I have to tell you something, and you're not going to believe it..."

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"Ron? *Ron* saved his life? You're kidding. I can't believe it. I bet Ron can't either. He must be going spare. Where's the Floo Powder? We have to get to the Burrow. Oh, I wish I could Apparate. Where's the bloody Floo Powder?"

"Hermione, do stop rushing about. Five minutes ago you were crying hysterically and now you seem to be doing an impression of McGonagall on speed. I'm getting a headache. Anyway, I think the Floo Powder is downstairs in the kitchen."

"Go get it, then."

"Don't be daft. *Accio* Floo Powder!"

"Harry, you're not supposed to do wandless magic - oooh, it worked. Nice Summoning Charm."

"My specialty, thanks to you."

"All your specialties are thanks to me, nitwit."

"What a smug girlfriend I've got."

"Don't try to be clever, just give me the Floo Powder."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"Come and get it."

"Come and get it? What are we, twelve?"

"You're afraid of my superior strength."

"I am not afraid of your superior strength. You are afraid of my superior intellect. Do *not* make faces at me, Harry Potter. All right, that does it."

"Does what? Ow! Ow! Where'd you learn how to tackle like that? You're like an American linebacker, only, of course, much prettier and somewhat less burly."

"Flattery will not help you. I am going to sit on you until you give me the Floo Powder. What did you do with it, anyway?"

"I hid it somewhere on my body. Want to look for it?"

"Are you daring me?"

"I might be..."

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"Enervate."

Draco came back to consciousness instantly, his eyes flying open, fixing on Sirius' face. "Where am I?"

"In Percy Weasley's bedroom. Sorry to wake you up; I want you to drink this. It's a Warming Potion. Do you need me to help you sit up?"

Draco hesitated, then nodded. Sirius reached out and helped him into a sitting position, wincing a little at the coldness of Draco's skin. He'd dried the boy's clothes with a Dessicarus Charm and covered him with every spare blanket he could find, but it didn't seem to have raised his icy body temperature much.

Draco took the mug from Sirius with the sleepy-eyed and unquestioning acceptance of the completely exhausted. He drank it down, holding the mug carefully in both hands, and handed it back to Sirius, who put the mug on the bedside table while Draco leaned back against the pillows, pressing the heels of his hands to his

temples. Sirius was reminded suddenly of being in the infirmary with Harry after the last task of the Triwizard Tournament; how drained Harry had looked, how pushed beyond the very borders of strength to a place Sirius couldn't follow after him, much as he thought he should, much as he would have wanted to. He had a sudden urge to reach over and pat Draco on the shoulder, or ruffle his hair, but didn't.

"Where's everyone else?" Draco asked, his eyelids drooping with tiredness.

"They're all downstairs. But you won't be seeing any of them until tomorrow. I'll go fetch your mother in a little while. I can't owl her while she's at the inquest but I think she won't mind if I show up in person. Not if it's about you."

Draco pushed a little fretfully at the enormous heap of blankets covering him. "But I want to see-"

"No," said Sirius firmly.

Draco looked up at him with huge eyes. Wrapped in blankets, so pale still that each of his eyelashes stood out as if it had been individually inked, he looked about eleven. "I was dead, Sirius," he said. "I saw the Founders - all except Slytherin - I talked to them, and -"

Sirius took him firmly by the shoulders. "Draco," he said. "You need to go to sleep. Your body needs the rest. Tell me all about whatever you...saw...tomorrow. All right?"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "You don't believe me."

Sirius sighed, and let him go. "Honestly? No, of course I don't. You were very nearly dead, Draco. Your body was breaking down. Who knows what your mind thought it saw? But if it'll make you happy, you can tell me all about it - tomorrow."

Draco's eyes had fallen shut. "I thought everyone was curious about what happens after you die," he said, his words slurred with

tiredness. "Aren't they?"

"Yes, but unlike you, we do not all go on reconnaissance missions to find out. And that's all I'm going to say about it. Go to sleep, Draco."

Sirius got up. He was halfway across the room when Draco spoke again:

"I saw Harry's parents, too, " he said.

The mug flew out of Sirius' hand and fell to the ground, denting the floorboards. He spun around. "*You mean Lily and James?*"

"Yeah."

Sirius was aware that his heart was pounding unevenly in his chest. "What do you mean, you saw them?"

"What I said," replied Draco, in a vague sort of half-sleepy voice. "I was in a place full of ghosts. There were thousands of them. And Harry's parents were there; James thought I was my father at first, and came over to me..."

"You do look like Lucius," whispered Sirius, and then: "What did he say?" He heard the hopeful anguish in his own voice, winced at it. "Never mind," he said harshly. "You were half-dead, Draco, you were hallucinating."

"Why would I hallucinate Harry's parents?" Draco asked reasonably.

Sirius pressed the tips of his fingers to his eyes. "I don't know, Draco. Why does anyone have the dreams they do?"

"It was them. Harry's father looked just like him, and his mother-"

"Draco, I know you've seen pictures of them before, that doesn't mean anything. For God's sake, don't make yourself crazy with this."

"Harry's father said there was something in your vault at Gringott's for Harry, something he gave you just before he died-"

"James didn't give me anything just before he died," said Sirius flatly. "Go to sleep, Draco."

He heard a defeated sigh from the boy in the bed, and then a muffled, "Good night, Sirius."

"Good night. And Draco?"

"What?"

"Don't say anything to Harry about this, all right?"

A short silence. "All right."

Sirius went out of the room, shut the door behind him, and fell back against it, his hands over his eyes. Why exactly he had lied to Draco about having been given something by James, he wasn't sure. One thing he was sure of, though. He would be going to Gringott's tomorrow.

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Ron and Ginny sat with Harry and Hermione (recently arrived via Floo Powder) at the table in the Weasley's warm, yellow-lit kitchen, drinking tea and eating digestive biscuits straight out of the packet.

"He's *really* all right?" Hermione asked for the eighth time, and for the eighth time, Ron nodded.

"He's fine...unfortunately."

Hermione threw a biscuit at him. "Karma, Ron."

Ron caught the biscuit and handed it to Ginny, who grinned at him. "I'm not worried about my karma," said Ron smugly. "Considering."

"True," Harry pointed out. "You did save Malfoy's life. Although you dithered a bit at first..."



"Did not. Well, a little. He just looked so *dead*, it seemed pointless."

"He was dead," said Hermione, eating a biscuit. "Clinically, anyway, he must have been dead. No pulse, no heartbeat...no brain waves, maybe..."

"Does Malfoy ever have brain waves?" put in Ron, but Hermione ignored him.

"It's interesting," she added, her eyes lighting up, "that Draco being clinically dead was enough to counteract the love potion. It's an intersection of magic and science I hadn't really considered before, and the possible implications-"

"Have another biscuit, Hermione," said Harry, firmly, shoving one into her hand.

She smiled at him. "Am I being boring?"

He kissed her ear. "Yes, but in a very interesting way."

"Ginny's interested," said Hermione, pointing at Ginny, who had her chin on her hand and was smiling.

"Not, I'm not," said Ginny candidly. "I was just thinking that Ron has now officially gotten more action with Draco than I have." She turned a dazzling smile on her brother. "Congratulations, Ron!"

Ron blanched. "I have to go brush my teeth," he said, making as if to stand up, but Ginny grabbed his arm and yanked him back down.

"You've already brushed your teeth twelve times and it hasn't helped," she said. "Face it. You kissed Malfoy, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Now, now," said Harry, grinning like a fiend. "It was a medical procedure. A medical procedure that just happens to look a *lot* like necking."

"*You* were the one who got all hysterical!" said Ron, pointing a

shaking finger at Harry. "I would just have let him die!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "No, you wouldn't, Ron, because you're a good guy and good guys do not just let other people die, even total pills like Malfoy."

"Argh," said Ron, and put his head down on the table.

"Ron's having issues," Ginny sang, hopping up to retrieve some milk from the sideboard. 'Ron's having iss-ues..."

"I hate you all," said Ron, in a muffled voice.

"Oh, come on. We're just winding you up. Hey, how did you know all those anti-drowning spells, anyway?" Harry added, curiously. "Not that they worked, but still, it was impressive."

"Well, they would have worked if he hadn't been so far gone already," said Ron. Then he looked over at Ginny, who looked back at him, and sighed.

"We had a brother," she said, looking down at her hands. " In between Percy and Charlie. He drowned in the quarry when he was three years old. We never knew him, but Mum and Dad have insisted on all of us knowing anti-drowning spells, just in case anything ever happens."

Hermione glanced over at Harry, who looked astonished. Apparently neither of them had known this fact about Ron's family. They could both, however, tell that questions on this topic would not be welcome, so restrained themselves. "Why didn't they just fill in the quarry?" wondered Hermione instead.

Ron shrugged. "You can't. They tried. It's got some kind of magical protection on it - fill it in, it just reappears the next day. So they put up wards around it. They only took them down when Ginny was twelve, the figured we were all old enough not to fall in, and all of us can swim, so...Harry, how did you know that other stuff?"

"CPR?" said Harry, and made a face. "I used to have to go with

Dudley to swimming lessons, but I wasn't actually allowed to take lessons with him, because that cost money. So I used to sit in on the CPR classes. I must have sat through the same class about fifteen times."

Hermione grinned at him. "I figured you nicked it off watching 'Baywatch.'"

Harry looked indignant. "I've never watched 'Baywatch!'"

"Bet you have."

"I have not."

"What are you two blithering on about?" Ron demanded, raising his head off his arms.

"Girls in bikinis," said Hermione.

"I'm not sure even that could lift me out of my despair," said Ron gloomily.

"*Despair?*" Hermione jumped up, came around the table, grabbed Ron by the shoulders, and kissed him firmly on both cheeks. "You saved someone's life, Ron Weasley," she announced. "I think this makes you a hero. And the fact that you don't even like him, that makes you even *more* heroic. So there."

Ron blushed scarlet.

"That's right!" agreed Ginny, swooping down to give Ron a hug as well. Hermione threw her arms around Ron from the other side. "Hey," Ron protested feebly, although he looked like he was having a good time. "Girls! You're messing up my hair!" Harry looked over at them, grinned, got up, and threw himself into the group hug with such enthusiasm that Ron was knocked off his chair and all four of them collapsed to the ground in a giggling heap.

"Well, well," said an amused voice from the doorway. "Am I late for the orgy or am I right on time?"

Ginny looked up, flushed from laughing, and clapped a hand over her mouth in surprise. "*Charlie!*"

The rest of them looked up as well. It was certainly Charlie Weasley, tousle-haired and tired-eyed. He was wearing his dragon-keeping clothes, and there was a dusty satchel slung across his back. "Hallo, all," he said.

Ron hopped to his feet. "Charlie! How'd you get here? Dragon?"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "I've told you before, Ron, people don't ride dragons. That's just a cutsey myth. I Apparated, what'd you think?"

Ginny stood up and held out a hand to pull Hermione up after her. "Did you come because of Draco?" she asked Charlie, looking curious.

Charlie looked blank. "Because of Draco..?"

There was a step on the stairs and Sirius came into the kitchen, looking disheveled and immeasurably tired. His eyes lit up when he saw Charlie, however. "Charlie," he said eagerly, crossing the room to shake Charlie's hand, 'did you get my owl, then? Wonderful, I really need to get back to the Manor and -"

Charlie was shaking his head. "I didn't get any owl from you. I came because my mum wrote and told me about Dad being elected Minister, and since they had to stay in London for a few days she asked me-" He glanced around again, as if seeing Harry and Hermione for the first time. "What are you lot doing here, anyway?"

There was a short silence. Harry looked at Ron. Ron looked at Ginny. Ginny looked at Sirius. Sirius looked at Charlie, and sighed.

"Come on into the living room for a second, Charlie," he said. "I'll fill you in on the details."

"All right," said Charlie slowly, hefting his satchel onto his back.

Sirius turned to the rest of them. "I want one of you to sit with Draco, just in case anything happens - nothing will, he's fine, but just as a precaution."

"I will," said Ginny immediately.

"Thanks." Sirius turned back to Charlie. "Let's go."

As Charlie followed Sirius out of the room, Hermione heard him say, "I brought a bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey with me."

Sirius clapped him on the back. "Bless you, Charlie Weasley."

\*\*\*

"Here's that book I was telling you about," said Ron, coming into the living room where Hermione was sitting on the overstuffed sofa, her hands wrapped around a mug of tea. Harry was lying on his back on the couch, his head in Hermione's lap, an arm thrown over his face.

Hermione put her mug down and took the proffered book, a musty-looking leather-bound tome with gold stamping on the spine: *Lives of the Hogwarts Founders*. "Thanks, Ron."

Ron sat down in the armchair next to her. "He asleep?" he asked, jerking his chin towards Harry.

"Mmmph," said Harry without moving.

"That means no," said Hermione, opening the book and beginning to scan the pages. "I think."

"What are you looking for in the book?" Ron asked curiously.

"Not sure, exactly. Information about their lives...I want to know more about Slytherin and Rowena's relationship, really."

"Wasn't there anything about that in Slytherin's diary?"

"Yes, but he was pretty mad about the whole thing and just ranted

on and on about destiny and fate and rather a lot about lizards. What was interesting about Slytherin...well, to me, anyway, were the parallels to He Who Must Not Be Named. I mean Voldemort got a lot of his ideas from Slytherin, I think - the Dark Mark, the whole process by which he tried to achieve immortality. I don't know what it means, but-

"It means that evil is evil, Hermione," Ron said, a bit bitterly. "Whatever time period you're in."

Hermione cocked her head to the side, but couldn't read his expression. "You all right?"

Before Ron could reply, the living room door opened and Sirius and Narcissa entered. Narcissa's face was nearly hidden by the hood of her cloak, but Hermione could see how anxious she looked. With no warning whatsoever, she swooped down on Ron, and kissed him. For the second time that evening, Ron turned scarlet.

"Sirius told me what you did for Draco," she said to him.

"Erm," said Ron, sinking down in his seat. "It was nothing."

"It was not nothing! It was everything. You're a wonderful, brave, amazing person, Ronald Weasley, and I'm very grateful to you."

Ron, still busy exploring all the different shades of red it was possible to turn, appeared to have nothing to say to this.

Sirius looked as if he wasn't so tired, he might have smiled. "Come along, love," he said. "Draco's upstairs with Charlie and Ginny."

Releasing Ron with a last look of gratitude, Narcissa followed Sirius upstairs.

Hermione grinned at Ron. "You've been getting kissed a lot this evening, haven't you?"

Ron blinked, his color having returned to normal. "All right," he said grudgingly. "I still don't like Malfoy. But his mum's all right."

Hermione tried not to giggle, not wanting to disturb Harry. "'You're a wonderful, brave, amazing person, Ronald Weasley,'" she said throatily. Ron made a face at her. "Maybe she can convince the Ministry to give you a medal - ooh, or your very own Chocolate Frog card."

"Bah," said Ron, but looked thoughtful. He got up out of his chair, leaned over, and kissed Hermione on the temple. "I'm going to bed. See you in the morning."

"See you."

"Mpph," said Harry again, feebly waving a few fingers in Ron's direction.

"That means 'good night,'" Hermione translated for Ron's benefit. He waved from the doorway and was gone, shutting the door behind him.

Absently stroking Harry's hair, Hermione returned to her book. "Hey, Harry, do you want me to read out loud to you?"

"Mppphkay."

"All right, then. *Folk legend holds that the Lycanthe was invented by none other than Rowena Ravenclaw herself,*" she read, *"to deal with the plague of werewolves that were at that time overrunning the British Isles - that would be thanks to Slytherin, I'm sure - and was usually made of silver, a metal abhorred by the lycanthropic. It can be easily enchanted to create a Portkey, it purifies water, and ... it makes girls' clothing invisible. What do you think of that, Harry?"*

Harry didn't respond.

"You're asleep, aren't you?" Hermione sighed, looking down at the top of his head.

This was a rhetorical question. Harry was indeed asleep, his eyes shut fast, his left hand gripping the hem of her cardigan. She sighed

again and put her book down.

"Harry..." She ran her fingers through his hair, marveling as always that despite its perpetual untidiness, it was so soft.

Careful not to disturb him, she reached into her pocket and drew out her wand. "*Quiesce*," she murmured softly, gently stroking his cheek. "*Dulce somnolus*," and felt him relax against her even further. She had invented the spell herself, a charm for restful and untroubled sleep, specifically for Harry. She had seen him fall asleep enough times, over his books in the library, in the Gryffindor common room, to know that his sleep was rarely unbroken. And she had used it on him often before, although he had never known that. It was because he had nightmares: this she knew because Ron had told her. In fact, he had them so badly that Seamus Finnegan had once suggested to Ron that they ask if Harry could be moved into another room, or even have his own, so he would no longer be waking them up. Whereupon Ron had told him that if he, Seamus, ever suggested anything like that again, he, Ron, would throw him in the lake.

Hermione sighed. She knew that she should wake Harry up, send him off to sleep in Ron's room while she went off to Ginny's, but it was something of a special privilege, she thought, to get to watch someone you love sleeping, and she hardly ever got to watch Harry sleeping peacefully. And it was doubly precious because for those moments while he was sleeping she could be sure that he was not in any peril, was not suddenly going to be thrown into danger, hurt or killed or horribly mangled. She laid the book down on the table next to the couch and leaned forward, putting her arms around him, and let her hair fall down like a curtain around them, hiding the rest of the world from view.

\*\*\*

Draco awoke, keeping his eyes shut fast, reeling from the shock of having slept-and not having dreamed. He turned over, opened his eyes and saw a blur of colors that resolved itself slowly into the bright yellow of Percy's bedroom wallpaper, a square of blue sky outside the window, the red armchair next to the bed, and in the



armchair a blur of black, white and green that wavered once and turned into Harry.

Harry was sitting in the chair with his chin on his hand, one of his feet up on the bed. He looked wide-awake and horribly cheerful, and across his lap, gleaming brightly in the sunlight streaming through the window, was Slytherin's sword.

Draco sat up so fast his head spun. "Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry looked at him oddly. "I'm sitting in a chair. Is there something unusual about that?"

"Are you really here? As in, actually here and not just a projection of yourself?"

In response, Harry kicked the side of the bed. "Yep."

"Is that wise? Given the events of yesterday? I'm surprised Sirius is letting you hang around with me."

"I didn't tell anyone about yesterday."

"You didn't *tell* anyone? What - why not?"

"Two things," said Harry, leaning over and propping the sword against the wall where it gleamed incongruously against Percy's yellow wallpaper. "One: the state you're in, you couldn't attack me with a piece of spaghetti because it would be too heavy for you. Two: you didn't dream anything last night. Did you?"

"No," said Draco, looking warily at Harry. "So?"

"So maybe the love potion wasn't the only spell broken by your death."

"Potter," said Draco dubiously. "That's a pretty shaky hypothesis."

"Well, let me ask you something then."

"What?"

"Do you feel like killing me right now?"

"Erm. Well. No, actually."

Harry shrugged. "There you go." He propped the sword against the wall, reached over, picked a glass of water up off the bedside table, and shoved it at Draco. "Here. Drink this. And quit bellyaching."

Draco sat up to take the water, and glanced down at himself. He appeared to be clad in a pair of maroon pajamas. Weasley hand-me-downs, he thought glumly. Maroon was a color that looked only slightly less noxious on him than pink. "How long have I been asleep, anyway? And who decided your hideous visage should be the first thing I saw when I woke up?"

"You mean how long have you been passed out?" replied Harry. "About sixteen hours. And we've been taking turns watching you."

Draco looked at him with deep suspicion. "Who put these pajamas on me?"

"Ron did. Oh, and he gave you a sponge bath. He's become very attached to you. It's really kind of cute."

Draco sprayed water all over the bed. "Whaaaat?"

"Just kidding," said Harry brightly. "Fear not, Ron still hates you with a fiery passion. And your mum put those pajamas on you. She sat with you here all night and all morning, but she had to go back to the Ministry this afternoon. She sent you love and kisses, which I will refrain from personally delivering."

"Good," said Draco, giving Harry a very dark look. "You're disgustingly cheerful this morning, Potter. What's got into you?"

Harry leaned back in his chair and grinned at Draco. Draco thought he hadn't seen Harry look nearly this cheerful in weeks. It was

slightly unbalancing. He had become used to Harry with either a permanent scowl or a permanent worried look. "Well, Malfoy, it's about that love potion."

Draco felt himself flush slightly. He reached over and put the glass down on the bedside table with a thump. "Oh. Yes?"

"Did you know it was irreversible except by death?"

"No. And?"

"Well, you died."

"So I did." Draco blinked in amazement. "I did," he said again, trying to get his mind around how he felt about this new development.

Harry was silent. He was a bit like Sirius in that respect, Draco thought. He knew when to talk and when to be quiet.

"Can I talk to her, then?" said Draco, finally.

"Hermione? Uh, yeah," said Harry, with only a trace of hesitation. "Why not? Oh," he reached behind him, and lifted a brown paper-wrapped parcel off the bedside table. "I almost forgot. You got an owl."

"Really? From who?"

"From Snape," said Harry, handing over the package as if it were a bomb about to go off. "Malfoy, why is Snape sending you care packages?"

"I was staying with him. Long story." Draco tore at the twine that held the package closed, but his fingers still wouldn't quite do what he wanted.

*Here.*

Draco glanced up as Harry took something out of his pocket and tossed it to him. He caught it reflexively. It was Sirius' penknife, the

one that had made the scar on Draco's hand. And the matching one on Harry's.

*Thanks.*

He flicked open the blade and sliced the package open. A flask full of asphalt-colored liquid and a folded note fell out onto his lap. He shoved the note in the breast pocket of his pajamas, twisted off the lid of the flask, and drank the fluid down, grimacing only slightly at the now-familiar taste of the Will-Strengthening potion.

Harry was looking at him as if he expected him to suddenly sprout beetles out of his ears. "I can't believe you just drank that. Did you know what it was? It could have been poison. You *stayed* with Snape?"

Draco dropped the penknife on the bedside table and shrugged. "The difference between us, Potter - well, one of the many differences between us - is that Snape likes me. He would not send me poison. And yes, he let me stay with him. Sort of. I kind of left without telling him where I was going."

"Color me astonished. That's so *unlike* you, Malfoy."

"Quit with the guilt already. I got enough of that from Sirius. Look, I still think I did the right thing."

"The right thing? Malfoy, you *died*. I think the words 'I told you so' are a tad redundant at this juncture."

"Oh, very funny."

"I just thought that we were-"

"What? Friends? We're *not* friends."

"I was going to say 'in this together' but fine, have it your way."

Draco blinked at Harry. Was it his imagination, or did Harry look very slightly as if his feelings had been hurt? *So what?* he thought to

himself, and then, more contritely, *well...*

"We can't be in anything together," he pointed out, slightly less disagreeably. "First time I saw you yesterday, I stabbed you. I think that about rules out some kind of Batman and Robin type relationship."

"Look, Malfoy, my point was not that you should have hung around long enough to give into your homicidal urges regarding me. My point was that you should have let us in on your little plan. Do you think Sirius would have prevented you from asking Snape for help? He'd have written to him for you, pulled all his Ministry strings; Lupin could have given you Willpower charms..."

"Or they could have wound up chaining me up in the dungeon with the torture instruments." *Like my father would have done.*

"You just don't know who to trust, do you?"

"I don't trust myself," said Draco shortly. "That's the point."

"Well, I trust you," said Harry, scowled, and looked as if he were about to add "so there", but was restraining himself.

"And that's a stupid thing to do," said Draco flatly.

"I'm not the one who does stupid things. That's your department."

Draco crossed his arms and glared at Harry. "I do *not* do stupid things."

"Oh, I don't know. First you insist on keeping an object you know perfectly well is a Talisman of Purest Evil. Then you don't tell anyone that the sword is giving you nightmares or that it's telling you to kill your friends. Then you tell off Lupin when he's trying to help you, snap at Sirius, and go stomping off into the night with your demon sword and try to feed yourself to a large and angry group of dragons. What were you planning on doing for an encore? Standing on a hilltop during a lightning storm wearing a wet suit of armor and yelling 'All gods are bastards!' at the top of your lungs?"

Draco burst out laughing and the angry tension between them, which had been spiraling upwards rapidly, broke.

Harry smiled grudgingly.

"That was actually pretty funny, Potter. And here I always thought you had the sense of humor of a wet bowl of tapioca."

"So you admit you can be wrong."

Draco looked at Harry.

Harry looked back with steady unwavering green eyes.

"Okay," said Draco. "Sometimes I'm wrong. Of course," he added, "about as often as the sky turns green and the Earth starts revolving backwards, but, you know..."

"I'll take that as a full admission of guilt, apology included. Now, it's your turn to do something for me."

"Oh yeah? What?"

"Tell me something about Snape," said Harry, rather unexpectedly. "Something...bad. So that when he's glaring at me in Potions with his greasy little eyes, I can think to myself, 'right, mate, go ahead and glare, but I know that you're actually a pool shark down at the Three Broomsticks where you make everyone call you 'Jimbo.' "

Draco spluttered with laughter. "Potter! You sound like me!"

"Not at all. Come on, Malfoy, spill. You were in his house. You must know something. Does he torture small animals? Does he keep pictures of Professor McGonagall under his pillow? Does he dress up like a woman when nobody's around?"

Draco grinned. "Snape? A transvestite? With that nose?"

"Come on, Malfoy, there's gotta be something."

"Well," Draco allowed, "I did hear him singing "Hooked On A Feeling" in the shower."

"You're kidding."

"He actually sounded pretty good. He hit the high notes and everything."

Harry frowned. "That's not really what I had in mind."

"I'm not sure I can do better."

"Make something up," Harry suggested.

Draco looked at him darkly.

"Oh, right. You don't lie. Have you always been like that or is this part of the whole New and Improved Draco Malfoy thing?"

Draco yawned and reached out for an extra pillow. "Don't worry, Potter," he said, putting it behind his head. "I may not lie, but I'm still a big fan of all the other sins: wrath, sex, loud music....you can handle the lying from here on out."

"Why do you get all the fun sins?"

"Because I'm a fun kind of guy?"

"If you think-"

Harry broke off at a knock on the door, tilted his head to the side, and smiled. "Hermione," he announced. "Must be her turn to watch you."

Draco looked at him curiously. "How do you know it's her?"

Harry shrugged slightly.

"You know her *knock*?"

Harry's ears turned pink, and he glared at Draco defiantly. "Don't tell me you don't."

Before Draco could respond, the door opened and Hermione came in. She looked at Harry, and then over at him, and smiled hesitantly. "So you're awake. How do you feel?"

Draco smiled angelically. "I feel fine."

*She looks really cute, he thought blandly at Harry. And that skirt. Very short. I can't believe you let her dress like that.*

Harry made a choking sort of noise. Hermione looked at him in surprise. "Harry, what?"

Harry made a gesture of dismissal. "Nothing. Inhaled some dust."

Take that back, Malfoy.

Hermione was still smiling at Draco. "When did you wake up?"

"Oh, just a few minutes ago," he said, with an exaggerated yawn. *Look how she's smiling at me. She really does fancy me. Oh, not with that sort of deathless-love thing that you guys have got going, but with that sort of raw animal attraction. Look, she's undressing me with her eyes.*

*She is not undressing you with her eyes.*

Hermione was concerned. "Harry, are you all right? You look like you've got a headache."

Draco looked mildly curious. *Been using the old headache excuse again lately?*

Harry made another choking noise. *Shut up, Malfoy. Or there will be an accident.*

*What kind of accident?*



*The kind where I accidentally eviscerate you with a carrot peeler.*

"Ahem," put in Hermione, sounding impatient. "Why are you two just sitting there staring at each other? Have I interrupted something?"

"What?" Harry turned around, and blinked at her. "Oh. No. Everything's fine."

Behind him, Draco made a snorting noise. *Buzz off, Potter, and leave us alone for a bit, will you?*

*No way.*

Draco's response had a whiney tone. *But you promised...*

Harry wheeled on him, then paused and looked up guiltily at Hermione, who was staring at both of them with a vexed expression. "Have you quite finished being antisocial and weird?" she said in a clipped tone. "Because Ron was saying he needed to talk to you, Harry."

Harry stood up reluctantly, crossed the room, paused by Hermione, then, with no warning, seized her and kissed her. Not just a casual kiss either, this was the sort of kiss that could have melted solid steel. When he released her, Hermione staggered back against the wall and looked at him with wide eyes. "*Harry?*"

He returned her look innocently. "Yes?"

Hermione took his arm and drew him towards her, speaking softly into his ear. "You don't, um, have a problem with me talking to Draco alone, do you?"

Harry cut his eyes towards Draco, who had picked up the glass of water from the bedside table and was examining it with a show of great interest. "Oh," said Harry. "No. That's fine. You two have a nice...talk."

Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek. "I love you."

He kissed her back, in his distracted state missing her cheek and landing a kiss on her nose. "And I love you. See you later," he added, turning and waving at Draco. *Touch her once, Malfoy, and they'll be picking little pieces of Malfoy out of the carpet for years.*

"Later, Potter." Draco returned the wave. *And if you can't find us when you come back, we'll be locked in the bathroom, playing bad schoolgirl and naughty headmaster.*

Harry poked his head around the door as it closed behind him. *Remind me why we saved your life again?*

*Because you're the good guys.*

*We'll see about that.*

\*\*\*

Whoever called it 'memory lane' was a cretin, Sirius thought, looking around him. *Lane* conjured up the image of a pretty country road lined with flowers, blue sky, birds chirping. Maybe that was what it was like if you were lucky. As far as he was concerned, however, memory was a black road lined with cruel thorns, paved with jagged rocks, bordered with the gravestones of his friends.

Sirius turned around slowly. It was cold in Gringott's vault #711 and his exhaled breath came out in a cloud of frost. It had been years since he'd been down here; usually his withdrawals and deposits were handled by owl post, and there was no need for a personal visit. And no wish on his part to see the detritus of his former life.

There in one corner was his motorcycle, gleaming and perfect thanks to anti-rust charms. There were the chests that held his old clothes, his schoolbooks, albums of photos, his Auror's Certificate. There was plenty of gold, the penalty money the Ministry had been forced to pay him when the original ruling that had sent him to Azkaban had been overturned. One thousand Galleons for each year he had spent in prison. It was quite a lot of money. Sirius had

touched very little of it.

He walked over to a corner of the vault and knelt down among the various books and papers. It took him a few moments of shuffling through them to find what he was looking for.

A book. Very fat, bound in leather, a silver-stamped spine.  
*Dialectical Interpretations of the Art and Science of Arithmancy*, by K. Fraser.

Sirius closed his eyes, and heard James' voice, sharp and amused, telling him that it was the most boring-sounding title he could think up.

He opened his eyes, sighed, and pressed down hard with his thumb on the F in 'Fraser.'

-pop-

The book's cover ratcheted back, exposing a hollowed-out space inside. It had once been the hiding place for the Marauder's Map, before its confiscation. Now, it held something else.

Sirius' eyes widened. "James," he whispered, his breath escaping from his mouth in little white puffs. "What on earth d'you expect him to do with *this*?"

\*\*\*

The moment Harry left, shutting the door behind him, an awkward silence descended on Draco and Hermione. Hermione looked at the floor. Draco looked out the window.

Finally, Draco sighed. "Hello," he said.

Hermione cleared her throat. "And hello to you too," she replied, and hesitated.

He half-sat up in the bed, the covers falling away from him, and even though he was wearing ridiculous too-big pajamas, and even

though his hair was standing up every which way like a platinum version of Harry's (unbidden, Hermione experienced a sudden vision of Harry with his hair bleached blond, and nearly screamed), there was still an odd sort of dignity about him. "You can come near me, you know," he said. "I drowned, it's not contagious."

She tried to smile at him. "I didn't know if you would want me to," she said, and walked over to sit down in the chair recently vacated by Harry.

Draco shook his head. "I'm not angry with you, if that's what you mean."

"I thought you might be," she began, and hesitated. Almost unconsciously, she reached up and touched the silver Lycanthe which she had strung on a chain around her neck; somehow she had found that doing this gave her strength. "Because I was utterly awful to you and I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say except that it wasn't really me. I never would have treated you like that if I'd been in my right mind. I never would have asked you to *lie*."

"Well, I managed to get around it by just not saying very much," said Draco, with a crooked smile.

"Knowing you, that must have been nearly as bad." Hermione smiled back at him.

"It's all right. I understand why you did it," replied Draco shortly, and his smile vanished. "Anyway, it's over now."

Hermione felt a flutter of uneasiness at his tone. "Well," she said, as lightly as she could, "at least now we can be friends."

"No," Draco replied without looking at her. "We're not going to be friends, Hermione."

She let go of the Lycanthe in surprise. "What? Why not?"

"Because I say so."

"That's not an answer."

Draco sighed. "Because someone once told me that there's a natural balance to all things. And this -" he indicated the space between them - "you and me, whatever we are, it upsets that balance."

"What? *No!* That doesn't make any sense, Draco. You know it doesn't."

"It makes sense to me."

She bit her lip. "I love you," she said, in a voice that wobbled. "I told you that before. Maybe not the same way I love Harry, but I do love you. Do you know what happened to me when I thought you died? Do you know how I felt?"

"*Stop it.*" Draco had thrown the covers back now and had slid to the edge of the bed, facing her. "Don't you see that's what I mean?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

He reached out at the same time she did; their hands met, and she gripped his tightly, trying not to wince at its coldness.

"There's something tying us together," Draco said. "Like I'm tied to the sword, like my father was tied to that Dark Mark branded into his skin. Do you remember what Slytherin said when he saw you with me? He was pleased. He was *glad*. Because he sensed that this tie, this bond, whatever we have, was working."

"What's wrong with having a bond? It doesn't necessarily have to be something *evil*."

Draco hesitated. "Every night I have-"

"Nightmares. I know-"

"Yes, nightmares. About *you*. Well, about other things as well, but you're always in them. And I know they're not necessarily my dreams, I know maybe they're being...sent to me from somewhere

else, but still. It's every night, Hermione, every night and I'm afraid...I don't want to hurt Harry. And I don't mean in some weenie emotional way. I mean I'm afraid of *hurting* him. And in the dreams..."

There was a ringing in Hermione's ears. She stared at him, at his gray eyes, charcoal at the edges blending into silver at the pupils. "What am I doing?"

"What?"

"In the *dreams*. What am I doing?"

Draco looked at her with obvious reluctance. "Sometimes we're married. Or, at least, we live together and it's all very ordinary and pleasant. Other times I'm...hurting you, we're fighting, and that's not so pleasant. Once we were hunting in the woods together. Two nights ago I dreamed that I was ill and that you came to see me..."

"And I told you that nobody had sent me," said Hermione slowly, her voice falling into a dreamlike cadence. "And you said that you let a snake bite you on purpose."

Draco had gone very white. "And I told you I loved you."

"And I said that you would sacrifice me along with all the rest."

Draco shook his head. "*Not you. Never.*"

There was a moment of total silence. Draco stared at her with the expression of someone watching the night sky for a glimpse of falling stars - bemused, distracted, hopeful. Finally, he said, "*How..?*"

She reached out and took his other hand, covering both his hands with hers, hoping it might make him a little less cold. "That's what *I* dreamed *last* night," she said. "I thought it was just because I had been reading about the lives of the Hogwarts Founders, and Salazar Slytherin *was* bitten by a snake once, and nearly died. But it was so real..." she leaned forward, looking at him intently. The blood was beginning to flood back into his face; there were patches of hectic

color on his cheekbones, making him look feverish. "Draco, you have to tell me *everything*. Everything that's been going on with you. I can help you solve this, I promise you I can. I swear. Do you believe me?"

He hesitated. "Everything?"

"*Everything*. The dreams, everything."

"Even the one I had about the Brazilian women's Quidditch team?"

"Okay. Not that one."

\*\*\*

"Hey, Ron. Have you seen Harry?"

Ron , who had been looking restlessly out the window, glanced over at his sister, who had just come into the living room, carrying a pair of boots. He shrugged. "I think he's in the garden with Charlie, getting his feelings out via de-gnoming. Why?"

Ginny flopped down on the floor and began lacing her boots up. "I wanted to ask him if I could borrow his pocketknife, but never mind. Why is he getting his feelings out?"

Ron pointed towards the staircase, indicating the upstairs floor. "Draco. Hermione. Talking. Or whatever," he said succinctly.

Ginny looked displeased. "And Harry let them? He shouldn't let them."

"Yeah, and you're entirely objective. Honestly, the tangled love lives around this place. You can't not *let* people do things, Ginny. You just have to trust them."

Ginny looked as if she thought this was an extremely suspect line of reasoning. "I don't see why."

"Relationships are *based* on trust."

"Can't they just be based on common interest and insane physical attraction?"

"Try to wind me up all you like, I will ignore you. What's with the boots, anyway?"

"I'm going down into the cellar to investigate."

Ron looked baffled. "Investigate what?"

Ginny shrugged. "What Dad's always going on about. Our Hufflepuff ancestry. I mean, if Hermione did say that Helga Hufflepuff in that tapestry she saw looked just like me. And if she's related to Ravenclaw...well, it just makes sense that if there was anything tying us to Hufflepuff, it's be in the cellar. I mean there's just miles of tunnels and things down there that no-one's even bothered to look into for hundreds of years. Remember when George found that spear thing and Dad said it dated back to one of the first goblin rebellions?"

Ron shook his head. "Seems a bit far-fetched, but suit yourself."

"Why don't you come with me? We're not needed up here at the moment."

Ron shuddered. "Spiders," he said shortly.

The door banged open, and Harry came in, looking disheveled. His hands were covered in dirt, and there was mud all over his white t-shirt. He glanced from Ginny to Ron. "What are you two up to?"

"Ginny's decided to excavate our cellar," said Ron, shrugging.

"And I want Ron to come with me, but he won't."

"He can't," Harry corrected, taking Ron by the back of the shirt. "I need him for something else at the moment."

Ginny made a face. "Have it your way," she said, yanked the cellar



door open, and stomped loudly down the stairs.

Harry looked after her, and then back at Ron, a quizzical expression on his face. "She seems...different lately. Don't you think?"

"Maybe," hedged Ron. "Harry, you're getting dirt clods on my shirt."

"Oh. Sorry. Here, come on upstairs with me."

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"I can't believe you're taking notes on what I'm telling you."

"Well, you never know what will turn out to be important, do you?" Hermione glanced up at Draco and smiled, tucking a wayward tendril of hair behind her ear. "I can't believe you talked to the Founders. In person. You're like ... history on legs now."

Draco looked mournful. "I'd rather be sex appeal on legs."

"History is a very sexy subject."

"Which is why Professor Binns is just hell on wheels with the ladies down at the Three Broomsticks."

"Professor Binns is dead, Draco."

"So was I, yesterday."

"Show-off." Hermione's smile took the sting out of her words. She bit the end of her quill and regarded Draco thoughtfully. Draco himself was sitting on the bed, knees drawn up, his hands looped around them. Hermione was leaning forward in her chair, notebook propped open against his legs. "Now you're sure that what Rowena said to you was that you need the Heirs, and their Keys."

"Yes. Does that mean something to you?"

"Not yet, it doesn't. Well, maybe. I don't know what the other Keys are, but I suspect the Lycanthe is one. I need to finish that book

about the Founders, and I'll get Sirius to bring me Slytherin's diary. Somewhere, there's an explanation."

In the face of Hermione's energy and enthusiasm, Draco suddenly felt unutterably tired. He yawned, sliding down under the covers. "Are you meant to stay with me while I'm sleeping, as well?"

"I will if you like. Although I think it's about time for Ron's turn."

"Ron? Doesn't having saved my life exempt him from sickbed duty?"

Hermione smiled. "Technically, yes, but we thought it would be a good idea for the two of you to talk."

Draco groaned and pulled the covers over his head. "This is a setup."

"Maybe," said Hermione severely. "But if we're all going to work together, and I think we have to, then it's best if we all get along."

"Maybe Weasley and I are perfectly happy hating each other."

Hermione looked at him severely. "Ron is not a hateful person," she said. "He does not *want* to hate you, or anybody. He's basically the sweetest person you could ever hope to meet."

At that moment, Ron's voice in the corridor became audible. "Why do *I* have to sit with the malingering bastard?" he was demanding loudly of an unseen companion, probably Harry. "You *know* I hate his miserable pureblooded guts."

"He's not malingering," came another voice-Harry's-- sounding amused.

"Well, if he's really ill a visit from me might push him right over the edge. I suppose that's something to hope for."

"Come on, Ron, don't you want your apology?"

"He's not going to apologize to me!"

"Bet he will."

"Bet he won't."

Hermione rolled her eyes in exasperation. "We can hear everything you're saying!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

There was a short silence. Then the door opened, and an unseen hand (Harry's) shoved Ron into the room, and slammed the door behind him. Ron, his hair wildly messy, glared at Draco and Hermione with the jumpy expression of a cat set loose in a room full of rocking chairs. "What?" he demanded, somewhat belligerently.

Hermione looked at him composedly. "Ron, nobody said anything."

"Good," said Ron.

Hermione turned to Draco. "Don't you have something to say to Ron?"

There was a short silence. Draco took a deep breath, and said, "Come here, Weasley."

Ron inched reluctantly across the room until he stood about a foot from the end of Draco's bed.

"Weasley," said Draco, looking as if every word was being dragged out of him with a fishhook, "I, uh, I know that I haven't always been the easiest guy to get along with. And I know that in an ideal world, you would never have chosen me for a friend, or me you, for that matter. But given what you've done for me, and everything we've been through lately, I just wanted to say that I've come to regard you as someone...as someone...someone that I've met."

Ron looked at him. "*That's* your apology?"

Draco had the grace to look embarrassed. "I can't help it. Malfoys don't apologize. In the olden days, my ancestors would just cut off a limb and mail it off to whoever they'd offended, or commit ritual

suicide."

"That sounds promising."

"It's not my fault," said Draco, sounding aggrieved. "It's just the personality I've got."

"Oh, yeah? Well, if it was my personality, I'd ask for a transplant."

"That is ENOUGH!" Hermione thundered. She stood up, glaring at the boys with deep displeasure. "You are both idiots," she said firmly, snatched up her notebook, and stalked out of the room.

Ron glared at Draco. "So," he said. "It's The Boy Who Died."

Draco looked bored. "I was wondering how long it was going to be before somebody made that lame joke."

Ron shook his head. "You really are an unbelievable git."

"What, just because you saved my life I have to laugh at your jokes? That's asking a bit of a lot, given their general overall quality."

Ron threw up his hands. "You know what, Malfoy? I don't even care. I don't want anything from you - not an apology, not your gratitude, not anything. I didn't save your life because I thought your life was worth saving. You might as well know that."

There was a short silence. Then Draco said, "That doesn't change things."

"What things?"

"You saved my life. There are rules in the Malfoy Family Code of Conduct about this sort of thing. I owe you my life. That means I have to stick around and wait for a chance to save *your* life, or--"

"I told you, I don't want--"

"That doesn't matter. The protocols have to be observed." Draco

swung his legs over the side of the bed, tested them, and stood up slowly. He was shorter than Percy, so had to be careful not to trip over his pajama bottoms. He reached out, picked up the pocket knife Harry had left on the bedside table, and flicked it open. Then he tossed it to Ron. "Weasley. Catch."

Ron caught the knife and looked at him questioningly. "Malfoy, what...?"

In lieu of a response, Draco started unbuttoning his pajama top.

Ron backpedaled so fast that he actually tripped over the edge of the rug and sat down hard on the floor, from which position he regarded Draco with eyes like dinner plates. "What are you *doing*?"

"Just a second." Draco calmly finished undoing the top three buttons of his pajamas, and pulled the collar away from his throat. "Get up," he said to Ron.

And Ron, looking as if he had just walked in on Professor McGonagall taking a bath, did it. "Fine, but keep your clothes on, Malfoy."

Draco grinned. "It's all part of the protocol. But all right. If you like." He stood up straight, his shoulders back, and looked directly at Ron. "You saved my life," he said. "The Malfoy Family Code of Conduct rule #613 clearly states that now, I owe you a debt in blood. That means you get one try at me with that knife."

Ron now looked as if he had walked in on Professor McGonagall taking a bath with Snape. "Oh yeah? Well the Weasley Family Code of Conduct rule #1 just as clearly states 'No chance, you psycho loon.'"

"Come on. One try at me. My ancestors used to do this sort of thing all the time. Just throw the knife at me. You know, see if it sticks. You don't have to aim at the vital areas or anything. Then all debts between us are discharged and I'll never bother you again."

Ron looked faintly green. "What about one try at you with, say, my

wand instead of a whacking great knife?"

Draco shook his head. "It has to be blood."

Ron stared at him. Then the faintest grin curled the left side of his mouth. "Do I have to throw it? Couldn't I just walk up and stick the knife in your throat if I wanted to?"

Draco didn't bat an eye. "If you like. But you miss the intended courtesy of the gesture if you do."

"You're mental," said Ron, flatly. "You do know that."

"I'm a Malfoy."

Ron glanced down at the knife, sighed, and fitted the handle into his hand. "Well," he said. "If it's tradition...."

Draco felt a very slight twitch of anxiety. Ron seemed to be holding the knife with a certain degree of...intention. Surely he couldn't have misjudged Weasley *quite* that much.

Looking resigned, Ron turned the knife around, took it by the point, and aimed it towards Draco.

Draco's stomach did a slow, rolling flip. *Surely not...*

Ron threw the knife.

It whipped past Draco's head, missing him by several feet, and embedded itself in the wall behind him, point-first (dead center in Percy's display of old Prefect badges, as a matter of fact.)

Draco looked at Ron.

Ron looked back.

"I seem to have missed," Ron said.

"Well," said Draco, kindly, "it was a very good try."

"Mmm," said Ron thoughtfully, and scratched his ear. "Could I maybe try one more-"

"No."

"Just for a-"

"No."

"I saved your life," pointed out Ron, for what Draco suspected would not be the last time.

"And then you threw a knife at me! What's wrong with you, Weasley?"

But Ron seemed hardly to hear him. "Malfoy?"

"What?"

"Is there really a Malfoy Family Code of Conduct Rule #613 that says I get one try at you with that knife, or was that just for my benefit?"

Draco looked back at him. And grinned. "Come to think of it," he said, "Rule #613 actually states that members of the Malfoy family who have artificial limbs should not attempt sexual intercourse in the moat. Whoops."

Ron shook his head. "I had a feeling."

Draco, busying himself with rebuttoning his pajamas, was startled when he looked up and saw that Ron was looking at him curiously. Ron paused, took a breath, and said: "Hey. Malfoy."

"What?"

"Do you play chess?"

"No."

"Do you want to learn?"

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"I'm really not sure I can help you, Mr. Black." Dr Branford glanced into the darkened cell, then back at Sirius. "Or your dog," he added, nervously.

"He's not a dog."

"No, I suppose he's more of a wolf, isn't he? A very large, vicious-looking wolf."

"He's unconscious."

"Isn't that fortunate. Look, I'm not exactly sure I understand why you summoned me here."

"My friend John Walton at St Mungo's told me you were the best for treating Dark Arts ailments."

"Yes," agreed the doctor. "I'm the best for treating Dark Arts ailments. In *people*. Not in animals."

Sirius gritted his teeth. "He is not an animal. He's a werewolf."

"He can't be a werewolf," said Dr Branford, with admirable dignity considering that Sirius was glaring at him with a quelling ferocity. "It's daytime."

"I know that. That's why I called you here. He should have changed back, but he hasn't."

"I'm not a vet, Mr. Black. I'm a mediwizard. Wouldn't an Auror--"

"As for Aurors, I'm an Auror, and I can tell you right now the Aurors College won't be able to help with this. All they'll want to do is bring him to their labs to be studied."



"Just because he's a werewolf?"

"Because it's the middle of the day and he's still a wolf. Because he's suffering from something I've never seen before."

"I told you," said the sharp voice of the demon from the other cell, "he is being Called. When he awakens, then you will hear such howling as you have never heard. He will tear his way through the bars trying to get out, trying to get to his Master."

Sirius regarded its gloating little face with loathing, noting with satisfaction that its head seemed somewhat flattened where Harry had dropped the wardrobe on it. "I told you to shut up, demon," he began, and broke off, seeing by the expression on little Dr. Branford's face that the good doctor had formed the opinion that Sirius was none too stable. The fact that he had a demon and a werewolf locked in his cellar doubtless contributed, along with the fact that Sirius, who had barely had time to shave or comb his hair in the past two days, was beginning to look a lot like his post-Azkaban Wanted poster.

Sirius turned back to him with a sigh. "Look...he's not an animal. If he was, I would have called a veterinarian. Could you just...look at him?"

The doctor sighed. Then, with an anxious grimace, he knelt down on the wet floor of the dungeon and poked his wand through the bars, touching the tip of it to the werewolf's fur. When he drew the wand back, it was emitting an uneven beam of spinning violet light. "Well, it seems to be true that he's human," said the doctor, standing up and turning the wand over in his hand, examining the light beam. "And he's been hit with quite a strong Stunning charm. Magid strength, I'd say. If you don't wake him, he'll be out like a light for at least a day."

"Is he in any danger? Is he dying?"

"Just unconscious. I can't say for sure how long this unconsciousness is going to last, but I'll give you some charms for

pain in case he wakes up. More than that, I really can't do."

"Thanks, doctor," said Sirius, listlessly accepting the Charm packets Dr. Branford drew out of his little black bag, and pocketing them. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," said the doctor, edging away from Sirius. "I'll just be getting on now, shall I?"

"I'll owl you if there's any change-"

"No, please don't," said Dr. Branford, and fled.

Sirius sighed, leaning his head against the bars of the cage, hearing the doctor's footsteps fade away in the distance. Slowly, he took his wand out of the sleeve of his robe, and tapped the tip of it against one of the cell bars. "*Alter orbis attinge*," he said, using a spell that he had learned during Auror training, which would alert him when Lupin awoke with a buzzing of his wand. He looked down at Lupin. "Old friend," he said softly. "What have I gotten you into?"

The wolf made no reply, and in fact there was no sound in the dungeon whatsoever, outside of the demon's harsh breathing and the guilty beating of Sirius' own heart.

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"I'm not sure staring at that thing like it's going out of style is going to give you any insight, Hermione," said Harry.

Hermione looked up from her examination of the Lycanthe, and shot him a look. They were both sitting at the kitchen table, Hermione surrounded by books and notes, the Lycanthe lying on a dinner plate in front of her. The Wizarding Wireless Network buzzed faintly in the background. *The inquest into Lucius Malfoy's death continues at Ministry Headquarters in London...meanwhile, in more rural news, an upsurge in werewolf sightings has been reported by wizards in the south...*

"On the other hand," Harry added hastily, "if you're enjoying

yourself, more power to you."

Charlie glanced over at them curiously from his place by the stove. He had an apron tied around his waist and was stirring a pot of vegetables with a long wooden spoon. Ron had been teasing him unmercifully about his apron, but Hermione privately thought he looked cute. Something about him, in fact, was making her wonder if Harry could cook anything. Probably not, there had never been much opportunity for Harry, busy with world-saving and evil-defeating as he was, to learn how to boil so much as an egg. "What are you talking about?" Charlie asked.

"This," said Hermione slightly dispiritedly, holding up the Lycanthe. "I've been trying to figure out what it is, what it does, but so far..."

"I've seen that shape," said Charlie, wiping his hands off on a tea-towel and walking over to stand by Hermione. "Carved into the side of trees in the forest. It's old."

"It's a Lycanthe," said Hermione. "It protects travellers against werewolves. Only, I think it does other things as well. When I hold it-"

"Can I see?" Charlie asked, and held out his hand.

Feeling an actual stab of reluctance at the thought of letting go of it, Hermione handed it over. Charlie turned it over curiously in his fingers. "*Monitum ex quod audiri nequit*," he murmured, and it gave off a sudden sharp flash, like sparked tinder. "Ow!" Charlie exclaimed, and dropped it back into her hand, looking sheepish. "I guess that didn't work."

Relieved to have it back, Hermione smiled at him. "That's okay."

The cellar door banged open and Ginny emerged, looking dusty and irritable. Hermione glanced up at her. "Anything?"

Ginny shook her head. "I found Fred and George's magazine collection under a paving stone. And when I say collection, I do mean collection. It was edifying." She shook her head. "That cellar is

*huge*," she added. "And its got all sorts of twisty little corridors leading off every which way."

There was a thunking sound, which turned out to be Ron jogging down the stairs. He came into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator door, took out a carton of milk, and drank out of it.

"Ron," said Charlie warningly, flapping his apron.

"Sorry." Ron put the milk down, and turned to face Harry, Ginny and Hermione who were staring at him with identical expressions of rabid curiosity. "What?"

"Did he apologize?" Harry demanded.

"Not in so many words. He made a speech, I threw a knife at him, I started teaching him to play chess, then he fell asleep in the middle of our second game and knocked all the pawns over."

They all blinked at him. "You're joking about the knife, of course," said Harry, finally.

"Maybe," said Ron, with a half-smile. He reached into his pocket and took out the pocketknife, and tossed it to Harry, who caught it out of the air and looked at it with a bemused expression.

"So, Draco isn't such an awful git as he used to be, is he?" asked Hermione triumphantly.

Ron rolled his eyes. "No. He's still an awful git. Now, he's just an awful git who owes me thirty Galleons."

"You played chess with him for *money*?"

Ron wasn't listening. "If you fall asleep in the middle of a game, is that a forfeit?"

Charlie looked up. "He's asleep? Isn't someone supposed to be sitting with him?"

"I am *not*," said Ron firmly, "going to sit around and watch Malfoy sleep. Anyway, he woke up for a second and said 'get out of here, Weasley, you gimp'. I don't think he wants me watching him sleep either."

Ginny glanced up. "I'll go up and check on him. Besides, he hasn't eaten anything since yesterday, I'll see if he wants any lunch."

She vanished, brushing cellar dust hastily off her jeans as she went.

Ron looked after her and shook his head.

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And he dreamed.

*He walked a narrow and sparkling bridge between darkness and greater darkness. At each side the path fell away steeply, so steeply he could not see the bottom of the vast abyss he crossed, nor its farthest end.*

*At the center of the bridge a man was standing. When he reached him, Draco saw without surprise that the man had his own face, a few years older perhaps, but no more than a few. He could have been his twin: slender, with silver hair, his eyes like pale jewels containing neither passion nor compassion.*

*Draco groaned and covered his face with his hands. "I thought I had gotten rid of you."*

*The other smiled at him. "I almost lost you, it's true. I thought I might have to follow you down to the Gray Places, but you came back."*

*Draco found the words he wanted to say without searching for them. "Why does it have to be me?" he said. "There are others with your blood, others like you."*

*"Perhaps, but there are no others like you."*

*"There is nothing special about me."*

*"That's a defeatist attitude, boy," said the other, mouth stretching into a malevolent smile. "Not surprisingly, you echo the darkness in your own soul."*

*Draco voice came out on a wail. "What do I have to do to be rid of you?"*

*"Try to destroy me if you like. You will accomplish nothing more than your own destruction."*

*"I don't believe it." Draco lifted the sword in his hand - in this other world, it was feather-light -- and swung it toward the man who faced him, swung it straight and true, meaning to slice him in half.*

*The sword flew, connected -*

*There was the sound of shattering glass. Draco jumped back as the shards of the mirror he had been facing fell around him like snow.*

He bolted upright in bed, hearing his own harsh gasps for air as if they came from somewhere else. There was a tearing pain in his chest and he pressed his fist against it, feeling it ebb slowly. His pajamas were drenched in sweat, sticking to him uncomfortably. He swung his legs over the bed, peeling off his pajama top, and his eyes caught a glimpse of a flash of light across the room -

The sword, propped against the wall where Harry had left it. The light reflecting off the blade had a reddish tinge.

Draco closed his eyes. That feeling was back, the feeling of having slept without resting, awakening more tired than he had been when he lay down. He wondered if he should write to Snape and ask for more Wakefulness potion to go along with the will-strengthening potion, but at the moment he didn't have the energy. He felt overwhelmed by despair, and more than that, by a rising anger.

And he was still exhausted.

He lay back down on the bed, pulled the covers up over his head, and fell back into nightmares.

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Ginny closed the door of Percy's bedroom quietly behind her and blinked to adjust her eyes. It was nearly twilight now, and the room was dim, lit only by a single fringe-shaded bedside lamp. She could make out the shapes of the furniture, the bed, and the huddled outline of Draco's sleeping form under the covers.

Quietly, she walked up to the bed. "Draco," she said softly. "Hey. Wake up."

Draco didn't respond. She tilted her head, looking at him, her vision adjusted to the half-light now. He lay asleep on his side, shirtless, sheets tangled around his waist. His head was pillowed on his fist, his other arm under the blankets. She could see where his very light summer tan ended at the base of his throat, the faint line of the scar under his eye where the shards of Harry's broken ink bottle had cut him. Most people looked different when they were asleep, she thought, younger, gentler, undefended, but Draco just looked the way he always did: contained, and guarded.

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder, meaning to shake him awake. His reaction was immediate. His hand shot out so quickly she barely had time to react; he seized her arm, yanked her down on the bed, and rolled over on top of her, his arm across her throat, his other hand drawn back as if he meant to hit her. "*What* do you think you're doing?" he hissed, glaring down at her.

"Ow!" Ginny yelled indignantly. "Ow! You bastard, get your elbow out of my throat!"

Draco froze, and lowered his arm, blinking. It was the most surprised she had ever seen him look. "Oh, I...thought you were someone else."

"Who? Voldemort? Get off me, you twit," Ginny snapped, startled to wriggle out from under him, realized something, and paused. "I,

uh.."

"What?"

Ginny found herself stammering. "I, uh, just came to see if you wanted any food. It's nearly tea-time, you know. Charlie made food. It's pretty good. And, uh, we thought you might want some food. Did I say that already? I, uh, I could bring you up some, or you could come down if you feel up to it."

Draco paused for a moment, and a faint smile flitted across his face. "I feel up to it," he said blandly.

"Right. Well, then, you'd better get off me so I can stand up."

Draco hesitated for a split second, smiled, and rolled off her. Ginny stood up, rather unnecessarily straightening her shirt, and, without looking at him, said, "Shall I tell them you'll be down in a few minutes?"

"Sure. Why don't you do that."

"Okay. And about the nudity thing..."

"I'll put some clothes on before I go downstairs."

"That'd be a good idea."

There was a short pause. He looked at her inquiringly.

"Right, then," she said. "I'll just go...away."

"See you," said Draco cheerfully, and Ginny ran for the door, bolted out into the hall, and slammed it behind her. *He's laughing at me*, she raged inwardly, starting off down the hallway. *He's the one without any clothes on, and I get laughed at. It's not fair*. She kicked out at the railing when she got to the stairs and was rewarded by feeling the wood splinter slightly under her foot. *Take that, Draco Malfoy*, she thought, *you obnoxious, smirking, naked sort of person*.



She was halfway down the stairs when she heard the front door bang open.

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Sunset came in shades of rose and sapphire and turned the sky over the Burrow into a mosaic of color. Sirius, however, was in no mood to admire the sky. He had arranged to meet Narcissa some distance from the Weasleys' so that they could talk privately for a few moments. When he Apparated into the middle of the darkening grove of trees, Narcissa was already there. She came towards him, her hair very silver in the half-light, twilight caught in the folds of her dark-red robes. She tilted her face up; he kissed her, and said, "Everything all right?"

"No. The inquest is horrible. They just don't know what to make of Lucius' death at all, and all his old papers have to be dragged out and gone over -" she broke off. "Never mind that, how's Remus? Did you get the doctor to come see him?"

"Yes," said Sirius, as they started along the path towards the Burrow. "But he couldn't do anything. He looked at me like I was a complete nutter, too. Which was a bit discouraging."

"Sirius, I think we'd better bring Draco back to the Mansion. You can't keep running back and forth between sickrooms, you'll drive yourself round the twist."

"I know, you're right. You know, I had another thought. I didn't want to go to the College of Aurors, but what about old Mad-Eye Moody? He's a bit of an iconoclast, and he knows more about the History of Dark Arts than anyone. I'm sure he wouldn't feel like he had to tell the Ministry about Remus."

"Mmm. Maybe. You know who else might be able to help?"

"Who?"

"Severus Snape."

"No."

"Sirius, don't be stubborn."

"I'm not being stubborn. I just said no, that's all. Because I hate the little rat bastard and I'm not asking him for anything."

They were coming into sight of the Burrow now. Narcissa gave an exasperated sigh. "He knows a lot about being Called-"

"This is the second time you've suggested Snape; I'm starting to think you know him better than you let on."

"Well, there was that one mad weekend we spent together in Bora-Bora."

"I have now gone to a very bad mental place and it's entirely your fault."

"Sirius, don't be stupid. I do know him, because he and Lucius were practically inseparable for years before he left the Death Eaters. He really knows a lot about -"

She broke off.

Sirius turned to look at her. He caught a single brief glimpse of her face, wide-eyed with horror, staring off past him, before she screamed.

"Narcissa?"

She tore past him, not even looking at him, hurtling down the path towards the Burrow. Sirius spun around in astonishment - and froze.

*No. It can't be.*

He stood where he was, too stunned to move, at least physically. His mind had already flown back, fifteen years back, to another night like this one, a night that was no longer dark but filled with the light of leaping orange flames - the house with its side caved in as if it

had been kicked by a massive foot, the choking cloud of dust and plaster that burned his throat, stinging his eyes as he crawled through broken slabs of rubble towards the sound of a baby crying - and over it all that deadly greenish-black cloud, its shape unmistakable, as it was unmistakable now:

A skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth, its dead black eye sockets filled with stars.

The Dark Mark.

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#### References:

- 1) The section that begins "*Harry*, Draco tried to say, but his own voice made no sound" and ends "He was looking at Harry's parents" is inspired by passages from Pamela Dean's book *The Hidden Land* (pp 144-46), Phillip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass*, and *The Odyssey*, chapter Eleven: "Odysseus Meets the Shades of the Dead."
- 2) "You died. I think the words 'I told you so' are a tad redundant at this juncture." -- Buffy.
- 3) " Standing on a hilltop during a lightning storm wearing a wet suit of armor and yelling 'All gods are bastards!' at the top of your lungs. -- Terry Prachett.
- 4) " I've come to regard you as someone...as someone...someone that I've met." -- Red Dwarf.
- 5) "I never thought death had undone so many" — The Waste Land, TS Eliot.

raco Sinister

## Chapter Ten - Bindings & Summonings

*a fronte praecipitium a tergo lupi*

"Enervate."

Hermione swam up through blind darkness, blinked her eyes open, and saw more darkness. She cried out in a muffled voice, and the darkness vanished, replaced by pale yellow light and an anxious face bending over her. It was Sirius, holding a damp cloth in one hand. "Hermione," he said. "Are you all right? Do you know who I am?"

She nodded, feeling sharp pain blossom behind her eyes as she did so. Slowly, her senses began to register her surroundings: she was lying on a couch in the Weasley living room, and there was a blanket over her. "*Harry*," she whispered. "Draco? The others...?"

"Ron and Ginny are still unconscious," said Sirius, not quite meeting her eyes. "They were hit with Stunning spells, like you were." He hesitated. "Neither Draco nor Harry are here. Hermione, what happened?"

Tears burst from her eyes. "They're not here? Where are they?"

"I don't know."

"Sirius, they could be-"

Sirius held up a hand. "They're not dead," he said. "Harry, at least, is fine, and I can't imagine that whoever took them would have killed Draco and left Harry alive."

"How do you know Harry's fine?"

Sirius leaned forward and pulled up his right-hand sleeve. On his

wrist was a flat silver bracelet Hermione vaguely remembered having seen before. In it was set a dark red stone that gleamed the way Crookshanks' eyes gleamed when the light hit them right. Leaning closer, Hermione could see that this effect came from a brilliant point of light inside the gem itself. "I Charmed this bracelet a while ago, just using some hair I took from Harry while he was sleeping. It's a simple Vivicus charm. As long as the gem glows steadily, Harry is alive and healthy." He smiled at Hermione - not a real smile, she knew, but he meant it to comfort her, and she appreciated that. "My Auror training was not entirely wasted, it seems."

Hermione shut her eyes, trying to think through the pain in her head, which beat in steady pulses that said plaintively: *Harry-Draco-Harry*. "Where's Narcissa?" she whispered. "And why haven't you woken up Ron and Ginny?"

"Narcissa Apparated to the Ministry to alert the Weasleys - they should be here any second. And I haven't woken up Ron and Ginny, Hermione, because - because Charlie is dead."

That brought Hermione into a sitting position, despite the shooting pain in her head. "*Dead? Charlie?*"

Sirius nodded, his face drawn and somber. "We found his body in the kitchen. Someone hit him with the Killing Curse." He paused. "Hermione - who was it? What happened?"

Hermione shook her head, bewildered. *Charlie wasn't dead, he couldn't be dead, it didn't make any sense; there was something wrong, something very, very wrong, a piece of the puzzle that didn't fit-* Hermione's right hand went up automatically and closed around the Lycanthe. Immediately she felt calmer, more able to breathe normally. She looked up at Sirius, saw the grief in his face, the terrible worry.

"Sirius," she said. "Let me tell you what happened."

\*\*\* *Four hours earlier.*\*\*\*

Staring after Ginny as she raced out of the kitchen to fetch Draco,

Ron shook his head. "I don't get what she sees in him," he said grimly, glaring down at his milk. "I just don't get it."

Hermione looked as if she was about to say something, then returned hastily to her book.

"Ron, you don't know anything's going on between them. Maybe they're just friends," said Harry diplomatically.

Ron looked over at Charlie where he stood at the stove. "What do you think?"

Charlie shrugged. "It's Ginny's business, isn't it?"

Ron tapped his finger impatiently on the table. "Come on, Hermione, you're both girls. She must have said something to you about Draco."

Hermione didn't look up from her book. "She said he's a Viking in the sack."

Ron choked on his milk.

Hermione looked up and grinned. "Just kidding." She returned to *Lives of the Hogwarts Founders*. "Ginny's never said anything to me about Draco. Yeah, I think she likes him. Does he like her back? I don't know. He's been pretty busy lately, so I think his mind is on other things besides girls. On the other hand," she added, "this is Draco we're talking about, so maybe not."

Harry's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. Ron, however, was glaring at her. "Go back to reading, Hermione," he snapped. "You are not being helpful."

"Knowledge is power, Ron," she said primly. "Besides, this stuff is really fascinating." She tapped a book page with her finger.

*"Slytherin was called the Snake Lord, whether from his ability to transform into a serpent or his habit of keeping snakes as pets, is unclear. Another school of thought holds that the moniker dates from his having survived the bite of the deadly Green Diamond snake, whose venom is known to be fatal."*

"Still waiting to be fascinated," said Ron, coming to stand behind her chair and peering, without much interest, at her book.

Hermione made a face at him. "Slytherin did survive being bitten by a snake," she said haughtily. "And it left a scar on his arm that later became the inspiration for the Dark Mark he used to identify his followers. He would sear the mark into their skin with the *Bruciatura* charm. Don't you find that interesting?"

"On the contrary," grinned Harry. "I think I speak for us all when I yawn and falls asleep."

Ron grinned. "Well, if they ever start a new class at school called 'Defeating Evil By Reading a Lot', Herm, you'll be top of our year."

"Ron, I already am top of our year."

"I knew that," said Ron. "Who's second, anyway?"

Hermione smiled quietly down at her book. "Draco."

"Malfoy?" echoed Ron, and even Harry looked surprised.

"Uh-huh," said Hermione.

Hermione flipped her book closed and grinned at the boys. "Both of you," she said, "would be right at the top of our class as well if you studied. And making up fake prophecies for Divination does not count as you well know."

"Study?" echoed Harry in mock horror. "And suck all the fun out of being young and stupid?"

Hermione smiled at him. "You won't always be young, you know," she said.

"No," agreed Ron. "But we'll always be stupid." He paused. "Okay, not everybody rush to disagree."

Hermione yawned. "I'm done reading anyway." She pushed the book away and leaned against Harry's shoulder. "Actually, I could use a nap."

"Me too," Harry agreed, and kissed the top of her head.

"Dinner is ready," announced Charlie, and as he reached to take the lid off the cooking pot the porch door banged open and Salazar Slytherin walked into the house.

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Sirius looked at Hermione incredulously. "What, just like that? He just walked in?"

Hermione nodded dully. "Yes. He just walked in."

Sirius frowned. "Go on."

\*\*\*

The door slammed shut. The sound echoed inside Hermione's head, which seemed at the moment like a vast empty cave of shock. It was as if a knife had dropped, severing the material of her immediate experience into two perfect halves. One moment, she was sitting at the Weasleys' comfortable, battered kitchen table, her hand on Harry's, Ron standing behind her. And the next moment that world seemed to fall away entirely and all around her was a black void lit by crackling lightning.

And there, facing them all across the darkness, was Slytherin.

Hermione stared, barely aware of the reactions of the others in the room - Charlie backing away from the stove, Harry seizing her arm, Ron frozen, rigid with astonishment. She only saw Slytherin.

She could barely recollect him as he had been before, it was too hard to piece the shards of dread, revulsion and terror into any cohesive memory. But she recalled his dark, sad, empty eyes, recalled feeling pity mixed with the horror and the hatred. He had



seemed empty, a hollow shell. But now. Now he was vivid, charged with menace and dark power, and it was entirely possible to see exactly why a whole magical community had once held him in terror and feared to speak his name. Even his face was different; he looked as he had in her dream of him, vital with dark energy, bright-eyed with fever and malice. And *young*. Was it possible that he looked younger? He more strongly resembled Draco now, in the sharp lines of his face, the angry curves of his bones.

*What had happened?* she thought in panic. *What had changed him?*

He wore black robes embroidered with stars and moons and winding serpents, but his hands were bare. He carried no wand. His eyes met hers across the room. "Rowena," he said.

Harry was on his feet so fast Hermione barely saw him move; he pushed her behind him, hard, and her back struck the wall. He gripped her arm with one hand behind his back, the other, his right hand, was outstretched in front of him. Hermione could see over his shoulder the clock on the Weasleys' wall, its face a blur as the hands that were Ron and Ginny spun around to indicate "mortal peril."

Icy terror gripped her stomach and she could feel her heart slamming against her ribs like a captive animal. She lifted her right hand and clasped the Lycanthe with it, shutting her eyes. *I won't let Slytherin take me*, she thought. *I'd rather let him kill me.*

As if he had heard her thoughts, Harry spoke. "I won't let you take her," he said, his voice surprisingly steady. "You'll have to go through me."

"And me," said Ron from behind her.

Charlie, standing by the stove, was silent. His hands were balled into tight fists at his side and his green eyes followed Slytherin's progress across the room with a look Hermione couldn't decipher.

It was as if they Ron and Harry not spoken. Slytherin continued walking towards Harry and Hermione. He moved like a Dementor, she thought frantically. Like a silent black shadow. His cloak was more than black, it was several shades darker than black. It seemed to draw in all the light in the room. Above it, his skin was corpse-white. She felt Harry's grip on her hands tighten unbearably, and then-

A scream split the room.

Hermione's head whipped around.

Ginny was standing on the bottom stair, eyes wide, her hand over her mouth, staring at Slytherin. There was an expression of utter horror on her face.

"*Ginny*-" Ron began to move forward, but at a sharp gesture from Charlie, froze in place.

Slytherin turned and began to walk towards Ginny. "Helga," he said, his eyes as bleak and dark as wounds in his face. "You were kindest of them all. And yet, in the end, you betrayed me too."

Ginny reached out and snatched up a chair, holding it between her and the Snake Lord. "Don't come near me," she hissed, fiercely.

"Or what? You will strike me with that rather cheap-looking piece of furniture? Go right ahead. You cannot hurt me."

As quietly as she could, Hermione began to fumble in her pockets for her wand. She couldn't just stand there and watch Slytherin advance on Ginny -

"She said not to come near her," came a quiet voice from behind Ginny. "But then I guess listening isn't one of your strong points."

Slytherin paused.

The shadows parted, and Draco stepped forward onto the stairs, moving slowly and deliberately. He had changed out of his pajamas

but his feet were bare, and in his hand was the sword.

*He's still weak*, Hermione thought. *He still hurts, and that's why he's moving so slowly*, but he continued down the stairs as if nothing were wrong, as if his slowness of pace was nothing more than an expression of insolence. "I mean, sure you can turn into a big snake and all. But really quality listening, you know, that's important too." He was standing on the bottom stair now, next to Ginny. She was still holding the chair. Draco didn't look at her, although he was obviously very aware that she was there. But his eyes were fixed on Slytherin. "You came here for me," he said in a clear, quiet voice. "Why don't you let the rest of them go?"

Slytherin smiled. It was much worse than Hermione had thought it would be. "What makes you think I came here for you?"

Draco paled slightly. His eyes darted almost imperceptibly towards Harry and Hermione. And she nearly jumped out of her skin in astonishment. She could have sworn Draco had not moved his lips, yet she could also have sworn he had suddenly spoken, have sworn she heard him say urgently to Harry, *Get her out of here*.

And Harry - Harry *replied. Distract him*.

Hermione felt Harry's hand slip into her hand - the one not holding the Lycanthe -- his fingers tight on her own, although he didn't look at her.

Draco's pale eyes widened, then narrowed. He looked at Slytherin. "Am I to take it, then," he asked coolly, "that the offer Wormtail made me still stands?"

At that, Slytherin seemed to tense. Hermione couldn't help staring at his hands. They were so long and pale and thin they looked like white tarantula legs. "You don't like being told what to do," said the Snake Lord softly. "But think on this. Join with me, and no one will ever be able to tell you what to do again. Not your father. Not

anyone."

"My father's dead," said Draco flatly. He raised the sword like a barrier between himself and the Snake Lord. "As you well know."

"Honor your father's memory then, and join with me. It is what he wanted for you. What you were born for. Or have you no blood loyalty?"

Draco stood silently. He had gone very white, and for that moment Hermione thought that in fact he did look very much like Lucius, and even more like the man in her dream, who had sweated and screamed with the pain of the venom in his veins. But when he spoke, his voice was controlled and careful. "I have no loyalty to a line both weak and corrupt," he said. "I want more than that. Can you offer me more than that?"

Slytherin's eyebrows drew together. Unlike Draco, he did not seem controlled, merely detached. But all his attention was focused on Draco, that much was evident. Harry's hand tightened on Hermione's, and she felt him begin to draw her aside towards the door. They moved as silently as possible, not looking at each other, only inching, slowly, towards the door that led to the garden.

"Perhaps you do not understand what your dreams are telling you," said Slytherin to Draco. "Perhaps I need to tell you a story."

"Ooh, I like stories," said Draco. "Especially if it's one of those stories about a girls' boarding school and involves treacle and a pillow fight."

This time Slytherin merely looked as if he didn't understand. His long spidery fingers clenched and unclenched at his sides. Hermione wanted to scream at Draco for provoking him, even though she knew he was doing it on purpose. He had told Harry to get her out of there, Harry and Hermione were nearly at the door now. Draco didn't seem to be looking at either of them, but once again she heard his voice, as she had heard it before, speaking to Harry. *Hurry up and get her out of here.*

*That's what I'm trying to do!*

Draco turned his attention back to Slytherin. "You know, we've been awfully rude hosts," he said. "Can we offer you anything to drink? Coffee? Tea? Hydrochloric acid?"

"You cannot kill me," Slytherin said.

"There are a lot of things I can't do," said Draco equably. "I can't ballroom dance. I can't see the point of pegged trousers. I can't understand why people own gerbils. I can't make a chocolate souffle that won't fall. I can't --"

"Your attempts to be funny are merely annoying," said Slytherin coldly. "But your attempts to distract me are actually dangerous. Not for me -- for you."

He raised his hand.

And several things happened at once. Draco moved back quickly, pushing Ginny behind him. Harry and Hermione reached the door and Harry stretched out his hand out for the knob. And Charlie made a sudden movement - out of startlement, perhaps, Hermione wasn't sure - and knocked the pot from the stove to the floor with a resounding crash.

Slytherin spun around and saw Harry and Hermione at the door. His hand whipped forward, and a jet of blackish light shot from his palm. It was like being hit head-on by a crashing wave, knocking them hard against the wall. Hermione heard more than felt the crack of her head against it, and doubled over, clutching her head in her arms, blinded by pain. Finally her vision cleared, and she blinked the tears out of her eyes, looking up -

To see Slytherin standing over her. He was looking down at her, and at Harry beside her and there was a very odd expression on his face indeed. Not quite satisfaction, not quite hatred, not quite something else.

"Get to your feet," he said.

Both Harry and Hermione stood. Hermione saw Draco and Ginny standing frozen on the stairs, watching. Draco had his hand on Ginny's arm. And Charlie had crossed the room to stand by Ron. He had a tight grip on Ron's arm and seemed to be preventing him from moving.

Slytherin took a step, not towards Hermione but towards Harry, who was standing very still, breathing hard, as if he had been running. Slytherin snaked out one white hand, and, to Hermione's astonishment, ran the tip of his finger down the side of Harry's cheek. "I killed you," said the Snake Lord softly. "I watched your blood run out of you and over my hands. And it *burned*. My cousin." He took another step towards Harry, who seemed too shocked to move. "And with your dying thoughts you cursed me. You well knew the power of the dying curse of one of our blood. And I had always thought you were stupid."

Harry winced away from Slytherin's touch, his green eyes gone dark, nearly black. "I'm *not* Godric."

Slytherin took a hissing breath, and dropped his hand. "I know who you are," he said. "Harry Potter. You killed my basilisk, the first of my children, my creation. If you think my hatred for you is any less than my hatred for your forefather, you are much mistaken. You will die like he did, and go down into Hell swallowing curses."

Harry raised his chin. And then he spoke, but Hermione could not understand what he said - his voice came out on a hiss that sounded like a thousand slithering serpents. He was speaking Parseltongue.

Whatever he said, it struck a nerve with Slytherin. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, he didn't move. Then he raised his hand and hit Harry across the face.

The sound was like a whip cracking in the nearly silent room. It galvanized Hermione; she leaped forward, pushing Harry aside, the Lycanthe in her hand, hurling herself at Slytherin-who smiled at

her, and raised his hand again. A flash of blue light flew from his fingers, striking her in the chest and knocking her back against the wall. She heard Harry call out, and knew without knowing how she knew that he was talking to Draco as he had before - silently.

*Give me the sword!* Harry called.

And Draco's voice. *Catch it.*

A flash of green and silver. Harry raised his hand, and suddenly he was holding the sword, a little awkwardly, but tightly, in his right hand. She saw Slytherin, his face darkening, saw Harry raise the hand with the sword in it - and pause.

Because Charlie Weasley was suddenly standing in the middle of the room, directly between Slytherin and Harry. His arms were crossed; he faced Harry, almost as if - as if he were blocking the Snake Lord. "Put the sword down, Harry," he said.

Harry looked flabbergasted. "But - *Charlie* -"

Charlie was pale as death, his eyes glittering darkly. "Harry," he hissed. "You don't know what you're doing."

He glanced back over his shoulder at Slytherin, who stood motionless, his eyes full of darting shadows. "Put the sword *down*."

Harry hesitated. His eyes flicked to the side, his grip on the sword loosening. And once again Hermione could have sworn that Draco called across the room to him, although his mouth did not move, and no one else seemed to hear. *Don't do it.*

And Harry replied. *But it's Charlie* -

*You can't trust him.*

*Of course I can.*

Hermione's head suddenly jerked up, and she stared at the clock on the wall. There were the nine hands that indicated each member of the Weasley family - Percy's hand was on "work", Bill's said "travelling" and Ron and Ginny's hands were clustered together at "mortal peril." But Charlie's -

Charlie's hand just said "home."

"Drop the sword before you get us all killed," repeated Charlie, not taking his eyes off Harry's face. "Don't play the hero, Harry - is it worth Ron's life, and Hermione's, and Ginny's?"

Harry went white.

"Don't!" shrieked Hermione, scrambling up to her knees, "*Don't listen to him, Harry!*"

Harry was breathing as if he had been running. His hands were livid on the hilt of the sword. "Charlie-I can't-"

And Charlie lunged at him, knocking Harry back into the wall, his hand outstretched for the sword. Harry, looking utterly stunned, twisted sideways -

And Charlie leaped back, clutching the sword in his right hand. Hermione heard Ron yell out "*Charlie! No! Don't touch it!*" as he flung himself toward his brother, knocking him to the ground, the sword rattling out of Charlie's grasp and skittering away across the kitchen floor. Charlie heaved up with his arms, shoving Ron off him, and scrambled to his knees, reaching out for the sword. There was a flash of movement, and suddenly Draco was there, grabbing at the sword. But Charlie, looking panicked, seized it first - he raised it in his hand, swung it towards Slytherin, calling "Master! It is here!" - then there was a flash of green light brighter than any light Hermione had ever seen, and she heard Ginny scream, and then there was silence.



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Hermione covered her face with her hands. "That's all I remember."

Sirius rocked back on his heels, his face bleak. "Jesus," he said. "Charlie? Charlie Weasley? I don't believe it." He glanced towards the kitchen, and she could see through the open door the huddled, blanket-shrouded form that had to be Charlie's body. "It must have been the Imperius Curse."

Hermione hesitated. "I don't know."

Sirius' hands were shaking. He looked from Charlie, back over to Hermione. "He offered the sword to Slytherin? He called him 'Master'?"

Hermione nodded. "I heard him. We all heard him. And Sirius - earlier, when Charlie took the Lycanthe from me, said a very odd-sounding spell over it."

"Can you remember it?"

Hermione nodded. "*Monitum ex quod audiri nequit.*"

Sirius put his head in his hands. When he looked up, his dark eyes were blank. "That's a Clairaudience Charm," he said. "It opens a line of communication between the speaker and someone far away."

Hermione nodded. "I think he was communicating something to Slytherin," she said.

He winced. "I can't bear the thought of waking them up," and she knew he meant Ron and Ginny. "I hope for Molly and Arthur's sake that it was the Imperius Curse."

Hermione sat up slowly, feeling her head spin. "I don't think it was," she heard herself say.

Sirius glanced over at her. "You don't think Charlie-"

"No," interrupted Hermione. She got to her feet, refusing Sirius' offer of assistance, crossed the room and walked through the open door into the kitchen. She heard Sirius get to his feet and follow her, pausing in the doorway to watch as she tilted her head back, and looked up at the clock on the wall.

Ron's and Ginny's hands had returned to the "home" position. Percy's said "work", Fred and George's "travelling", and Bill's... Bill's said "home." And next to his, was Charlie's, also at "home."

She bit her lip and turned slowly to the huddled, blanket-wrapped figure on the floor. Then she knelt down by it, and with a swift decisive gesture, yanked the blanket off.

Sirius leaped in surprise. "Hermione! What are you doing?"

But she was examining Charlie's body. It was still, already cold, his face slack as if in sleep. Suppressing a shudder, she reached out, took hold of his stiff right hand, and turned it over, palm-up.

It was unmarked.

Sirius was staring at her. "What on earth?"

She dropped the hand, got to her feet. "Charlie touched the sword," she said. "He's not a Magid. It should have burned him."

Sirius shook his head. "Hermione, I don't-"

She knew what to do now. She hurried across the room to the fireplace. Ranged along the top of the mantel were seven identical jars, each one labeled with the name of a Weasley child: starting with Bill at the left and ending with Ginny on the right. Hermione picked up one of the silver bottles, flicked it open with her thumb, shook some powder into her hand, and tossed the sparkling handful into the wizarding fire that always burned in the Weasleys' fireplace.

The flames turned orange, then blue, and a single sharp musical

note resonated through the room. Hermione waited, holding her breath - the flames darkened suddenly, and solidified, and then a head and shoulders emerged from the fire, a familiar face turned towards her, blinking and astonished-looking, pushing the dark red hair back from his eyes as he stared at her in surprise. "Hermione," he said. "What's going on? Usually only my mum uses this way of getting in touch with me. Is something the matter?"

Hermione released the breath she had been holding.

"Hello, Charlie," she said.

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Light came first, singing the backs of his eyelids, and then pain - aching pain, in his shoulders, back and legs, as if he'd been thrown hard against a wall. Maybe he had. Harry opened his eyes slowly, and the world danced around him in a whirl of color - primarily blue, with lesser patches of green, black and red.

He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. He was in a room, quite a large one, the walls and floor of which seemed to be made up of smooth blue marble. Black velvet tapestries depended from the walls, picked out in patterns of silver. There was quite a lot of unnecessary, heavy rosewood-looking furniture scattered around the room - chairs, tables, long benches, and a huge, heavy-looking oak wardrobe with two enormous doors that stood propped against the far wall. The ceiling was so high it disappeared into a cavernous dark emptiness.

There were no doors that he could see, and no windows.

"Good morning," said a familiar voice in his ear. "Or maybe afternoon, or maybe night, it's bloody impossible to tell in this place. How's your head?"

Harry looked around. That hurt too. Draco was sitting near him, leaning his back against one of the blue marble walls. He looked unharmed. He was still barefoot, and Harry saw that there was blood on his shirt, as well as long black burned streaks as if he had been

dragged through ashes. Harry wondered again what had happened after they blacked out. The last thing he remembered was bright green light -

He shivered. "My head? Rotten. Where are we?"

"I'm not sure."

"How did we get here?"

Draco replied with a shrug.

Harry pulled himself into a sitting position, and felt something sticky on his chest. He glanced down and saw that the sleeve of his white shirt was bloody - mostly dried, stiff blood, but some new. *Either we haven't been here that long, he calculated, or I'm still bleeding.* He pulled his sleeve up, saw the long cut along the side of his arm, oozing dark blood, and winced.

As if triggered by the sight of his own blood, memory began to come back to him, and with it, fear. He looked up at Draco. "Hermione," he said. "Ron - and Ginny. Are they -"

Draco looked away. "I don't know." Avoiding Harry's gaze, he stood up. His bare feet made no noise on the blue stone floor as he crossed the room, running his hand along the wall - looking for gaps or chinks, Harry imagined. He was reminded of a cat, curiously prowling the borders of new territory.

*Maybe you don't know, Harry thought at him. But what do you think?*

Draco didn't turn around, but kept moving towards the opposite side of the room. *Hermione's all right, he said. I feel it. I think Ron and Ginny are all right as well.* Draco turned around, looked at him. *But I can't promise you anything.*

*I know.* Harry couldn't have said why, but he felt that Draco was correct. Hermione was all right. Perhaps his mind was just telling him that because otherwise he might not be able to function, but he didn't think so. *Malfoy - what about Charlie?*

Draco paused in front of the wardrobe, his shoulders tensing. Wincing a little from the ache in his back, Harry walked over to stand next to him. "Was it my imagination," he said to the back of Draco's head, "or were Charlie and Slytherin working together? As a team?"

Draco turned around and looked at him. "Yep," he agreed. There was finality in his calm gray eyes. "I practically expected them to go into a planning huddle."

"But that's just not possible," Harry argued. "Charlie wouldn't do that."

"I agree." Draco turned towards the wardrobe, jerked the doors open, looked inside. There seemed to be piles of dark cloth in there, as well as some glittering objects that might be jewelry. Draco began poking at them with an experimental finger. "I don't think that was Charlie." His voice, a little muffled, reached Harry's ears clearly.

Harry blinked. "Not Charlie?"

"Not Charlie," said Draco firmly, and then he gave a little shout of surprise or amazement, and exclaimed, "Potter. You've got to see this." He retracted his head from the wardrobe, grinning with sly amusement. "Look at this. Somebody left you a present," he said, and he held out something that flashed red and silver in the blueish light of the room.

Harry stared in amazement. It was a sword -- Godric Gryffindor's sword to be precise, looking just as he remembered it - perhaps a little smaller, but that was because he himself had grown. He reached out and took it out of Draco's hand, running his own fingers over the smooth blade, the rubies in the hilt that formed the shape of a crouching lion.

"Why would he leave me this?" he wondered out loud.

"No idea. But I'll tell you one thing, this place is a lot nicer than I was expecting. Usually, your standard-issue dungeon is pretty grotty. Slime, worms, the howling screams of some poor bastard being tortured in the cell next to yours..." Draco shrugged. "The worst thing we seem to have to contend with here is the somewhat monochromatic color scheme. That, and the lack of food."

Harry, who had been growing increasingly aware of the rumbling in his stomach, was dismayed. "There's no food?"

Draco shook his head. "Not that I saw. And I've been over this room a few times."

Harry sighed. "I guess I wouldn't have trusted any food *he* provided for us anyway." Holding the sword carefully, he walked to the side of the room and threw himself down on a bench there to study it. A moment later Draco joined him, carrying his own sword. "Hey, Potter. I found a Scrumdilyumptious Chocolate Bar in my pocket. You want half?"

"Sure," replied Harry morosely. "Why not." He took half, and looked sideways at Draco, who was engaged in eating his portion of the candy. "I would have thought your busy little mind would've been ticking over possible escape plans by now."

Draco swallowed, and made a face. "Urgh. Lint. Look, Potter, there's no way out of this room."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well, there are no doors and windows, no secret passageways, no breaks in the stone anywhere, and on top of that-"

"I thought you were Cunning Plan Guy! What happened to Cunning Plan Guy?"

"I didn't say I hadn't come up with a plan. I have come up with a

plan. I just don't think you'll like it."

"I might like it," said Harry, around a mouthful of chocolate.

"No," said Draco, "you really won't like it."

"Just because I'm a Gryffindor!" Harry said disgustedly. "It's not like I can't appreciate cunning plans, Malfoy. Haven't I gone along with at least six of your harebrained schemes already? Haven't I been there for you, taken your side --"

Draco grinned hugely. "This is turning into quite an ode to our relationship, Potter," he said. "Keep it up. I'm feeling all tingly."

Harry settled into a sulk. "That's probably just residual chafing from the leather trousers."

"Those fucking trousers," said Draco irritably. "I have a feeling that nobody is ever going to let me forget them, even though I only wore them once, even though it was against my will --"

Harry snorted. "Now I'm imagining Charlie holding you down and forcing the leather trousers onto you."

"Hey, that's your pervy little fantasy, Potter, not mine."

Harry glared at him. "Are you going to tell me your bloody plan, or not?"

"Fine,' Draco said. "My plan was this. We wait here for Slytherin to come and kill us, and when he does, we die horrible, screaming deaths. I was also planning to gout blood and perhaps dribble a bit while I expire. What do you think?"

Harry was furious. "That's your idea of a winning plan?"

"I thought it was the most likely option."

"I can't believe you're just giving up."

"I'm not giving up; I'm being realistic."

"You're giving up."

"I am not."

"Yes, you are."

"This is a pointless discussion."

"But it does pass the time."

"I can think of better ways to pass the time."

"I didn't know your bread was buttered that way, Malfoy."

"What? Oh. Ugh, that is *not* what I meant. Even if my bread was buttered that way, you'd be last on my list, you're far too short and weedy."

"I'm the same height as you. I don't know...someone who dresses the way you do...all that attention you pay to your hair..."

"Paying attention to my hair does not make me gay. Paying attention to *your* hair, that would make me gay."

"I bet you do too pay attention to my hair," Harry said serenely.

"I do not. I couldn't even tell you what color it is."

Harry put down the remainder of the chocolate bar he had been gnawing on, and placed his hands over Draco's eyes. Draco jumped, and Harry felt the other boy's eyelashes brush against his palms.

"What are you doing, Potter?"

"Tell me what color my hair is," Harry said.

"I've no idea," said Draco, blinking furiously.

"Tell me and I'll give you the rest of my chocolate bar half. You're



hungry, I know you are."

"Potter!" said Draco. "You're a sadist."

"Mmm," said Harry. "Chocolate. Come on, Malfoy. Think of it as an experiment in perception and recall."

"Oh, fine," said Draco irritably. "Your hair's black, and it wants cutting."

"Does it?" asked Harry curiously.

"Of course it does!" Draco's voice was animated. "I don't even know how you can stand going around with your hair looking like you got dragged nine ways through a Tangling Thornbush. And your hair isn't even actually straight, you know, or it wouldn't be if you cut it, it's just too long, and all that weight drags it down. If you cut it, it'd be quite nice and probably curl a bit and you know, I can feel you staring at me, Potter. Stop it."

"I'm not staring. I'm just thinking that perhaps my hair isn't the only thing around here that isn't actually straight."

"Bah!" Draco batted Harry's hand away with an annoyed grunt. "You are a Philistine. You know nothing."

"At least I'm not in denial," said Harry, and handed Draco the last piece of chocolate.

Draco accepted it with a disdainful look. "Me, gay? Draco Malfoy? Madly loved by all women over the age of twelve? Six times already on The Teenage Witches' 'Most Eligible' list? Author of the best-selling autobiography 'Why I Like to Do It With Girls?' I think not."

"Stop. You're making me laugh. And that makes my stomach hurt. My whole *body* hurts."

"It should," said Draco, finishing the chocolate with a regretful air. "Slytherin threw you into a wall. And you've got a black eye going there. Very sporty."

"Well, you look pretty unscathed," said Harry resentfully.

In answer, Draco held out his right arm, and pulled up his sleeve. His right wrist was swollen and turning black and blue. "Sprained," he said flatly.

Harry whistled. "That looks like it hurts."

"No, it feels great."

"Shut up, Malfoy. You want me to fix it?"

Harry could have sworn that Draco hesitated momentarily. Then he sighed. "Sure. Go ahead and try."

Harry reached out and put the flat of his hand against Draco's wrist. "*Asclepio*," he said.

Nothing happened.

Harry tried again. "*Asclepio*."

Nothing continued to happen. Harry shut his eyes, and put every ounce of energy and strength he had into focusing on thoughts of magic, magic and healing, focusing on the shape of the magic, the feel of it, shaping, it, bending it to his will. "*Asclepio*," he ground out, and opened his eyes to see a startled expression on Draco's face. He glanced down at Draco's wrist, and saw that the blue-black color had faded slightly, the swelling receding - but the wrist still looked far from normal.

Draco jerked his hand back and looked curiously at his wrist. "It almost worked," he said, sounding surprised.

"Let me try again," said Harry.

Draco shook his head, eyes amused. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Harry opened his mouth to protest - and paused. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as if he'd just run a mile and he felt suddenly shaky and exhausted. "Something very strange is going on here," he observed, and looked up at Draco, who was watching him with a look of sympathy, but no surprise, in his gray eyes. "What do you know, Malfoy? Why was that so difficult?" Anxiety made his voice sharp. "Is there something wrong with me? If there is, tell me. I'd rather know."

"If there's something wrong with you then there's something wrong with me as well. I tried about sixty spells before you woke up. Nothing happened. It just made me tired. It was like trying to walk through a concrete wall." He glanced sideways at Harry; the light of the room made his light eyes look blue, and reminded Harry oddly of Ron. "It's not us. It's the room."

"*What?* How do you know?"

Draco sighed. "Because I know where we are. Oh, not in the sense of having the slightest idea, geographically, where we are, but I can tell you one thing - this room is a prison. A prison built to hold Magids." He glanced at Harry, who was still looking bewildered. "It's the walls," he said. "Look at the walls."

Harry reached out and put a hand against one wall, which was cool and smooth and felt less like marble than he would have imagined. Because of course, it wasn't marble. He looked back at Draco, a slowly dawning awareness in his mind.

Draco grinned, without any mirth. "I knew you'd get it eventually," he said. "What did Lupin tell us: the hardest substance in the world, repels magic, can't be crushed or broken-"

Harry shut his eyes. "Adamantine," he said. "We're in an adamantine cell."

\*\*\*

Ginny had never seen the Burrow so full of tension. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were had come home, of course; in the kitchen a white-

faced Mr. Weasley was in intense, whispered discussion with a large group of Aurors. Mrs. Weasley, having tearfully kissed and hugged a revived Ron and Ginny as well as Hermione, had retired to her room to lie down. Narcissa had returned to the Mansion, and Sirius had gone to the Ministry to help ascertain the identity of the fake Charlie Weasley.

"I can't believe that wasn't really Charlie," said Ron, still looking numb with shock. He was sitting on the living room couch next to Hermione, who, pale but composed, betrayed her tension only in the tight grip she was keeping on his wrist. Ginny sat next to them. "I can't believe we didn't *realize* it wasn't really Charlie."

"He made dinner," said Ginny in a nauseated tone. "And we nearly ate it. And he could have been anyone. A Death Eater. Wormtail. Anyone." She clenched her fist. "I feel so *stupid*."

"When you look at someone, you just assume they are who they seem to be," said Hermione in a dead little voice. "I mean, I thought Harry was the person I knew best in the world, and it took me two days to figure it out when Draco was pretending to be him."

Ron seemed about to say something to this when the door opened, and Charlie walked in. He looked tired - there were shadows under his normally cheerful green eyes, and his red hair was in tousled disarray. "Hallo, all," he said tentatively.

Nobody moved.

"Look, it really is me this time," he said, sounding slightly annoyed.

They all stared at him. Ron frowned. No one spoke.

Charlie made an exasperated noise. "Right then, ask me anything," he said. "Ask me what Mum's favorite color is, or what Percy's favorite candy is, or-"

"What's my name?" Ron interrupted, looking slightly wild-eyed. "What year is it?"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Look, we're checking for Charlie here, not massive head trauma."

"What's my *middle* name?" Ron demanded.

"Aurelius," said Charlie promptly.

This got a reaction even from Hermione. "*Aurelius?*" she demanded, staring at Ron.

Ron looked defensive. "What's wrong with Aurelius?"

"Well, for one thing it means your initials spell "RAW."

Ron looked as if this had not occurred to him. "I suppose that's true."

Charlie was now grinning a tired sort of grin. "Your middle name is 'Aurelius,'" he said to Ron. "Your favorite color is red but you hate maroon, when you were ten you cried because Mum wouldn't let you join a motorcycle gang and change your name to 'Kill Crazy' and last year you told me you thought the prettiest girl in school was -"

"All right," interrupted Ron, ears bright pink. "You're Charlie. Now belt up."

Charlie threw himself down into the armchair opposite Ginny and stretched out his legs. "You sure you don't want me to go on?" he grinned, but his expression turned serious as Mr. Weasleys entered the room, looking grave.

"I'm going to the Ministry," he said to Charlie. "There's twenty Aurors outside already the house and the AC is sending over twenty more. But I want you to stay here." His glance swept over Ron, Hermione and Ginny, and the implication was clear: *Stay here and keep an eye on the kids*. "You lot," he said to the three teenagers on the couch, trying to keep his voice as light as possible. "With forty Aurors outside, this should be the safest wizarding house in Britain. But I want you three to stay inside. You're not to go outside for any

reason, not even into the garden. Not until I come home and tell you otherwise. Understood?"

Ron looked at him, spoke for them all: "Understood."

Mr. Weasley looked as if he were swallowing past a lump in his throat, and nodded briskly. "All right, then," he said, and Disapparated.

Hermione stood up. "I'm tired," she said. "I think I'll go get in bed, do some reading." She looked at Ron. "Could I borrow a t-shirt or something to wear?"

Ron got to his feet after her. "I'll get you some pajamas from upstairs."

Ginny watched as her brother and Hermione walked up the stairs, and felt a sudden flash of an envy she had nearly forgotten. Ron, Harry and Hermione had always formed such a perfect little circle; no one else had ever been able to get in. Then Draco had come along and seemed to have effortlessly punched his way into the circle, and if he wasn't always welcome, there was certainly no question that he was going away any time soon. If nothing else, Hermione's sheer determination would keep him part of the group, and Ron and Harry would always, in the end, do whatever she wanted. But she, Ginny, often still felt as if she didn't quite belong, as if she were an outsider who had showed up at a party without being invited.

"Ginny." It was Charlie speaking, looking at her with questioning eyes. "Did you really think that that person was me? That I would do something like that?"

Ginny bit her lip, trying to focus her thoughts. "Well, at first you - he - seemed perfectly normal, and then at the end everything happened so fast we didn't really have a chance to think anything. Then we were unconscious." She raised her eyes to her brother's, saw the worry in his expression, the shadows in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Charlie," she said, her voice cracking. "It wasn't fair even to think that for a minute."

But Charlie, studying his hands, took a moment to reply. "It's hard to say," he said finally, "just what people really are capable of. You never know, people sometimes think they're doing the right thing, and then it turns out to be a mistake, but it's too late to change things."

Ginny was confused. "What are you talking about?"

Charlie smiled faintly. "Just rambling pointlessly. Ignore me. Come on, let's go into the kitchen - I'll make you some tea."

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"According to his Apparating License, his name is Alexander Taylor," said Mad-Eye Moody to Sirius, who was standing next the body on the gurney with his hands in his pockets and an intent expression on his face. The moonlight streamed through the small barred window overhead, turning the edges of Sirius' dark hair red. "And according to his Ministry Registration, he's a werewolf."

"A werewolf?" Sirius glanced down at the body of the man who had disguised himself as Charlie Weasley. The glamour he had been under was fading with death; the red hair turning black, the distinctive Weasley freckles disappearing. "Actually, that makes sense."

"Does it?" said Mad-Eye neutrally.

Sirius nodded without answering. Mad-Eye knew *about* Lupin - nearly everyone in the wizarding world did - but Mad-Eye also *knew* Lupin. He had been one of Sirius' instructors during his days of Auror training, and had met him not infrequently. He knew of their friendship. "What I don't get," added the scarred old Auror ruminatively, scratching his head, "is how the attacker" --(so far, no one had mentioned Slytherin by name, but had referred to him simply as 'the attacker' - trying not to sound too mad, Sirius suspected)--"managed to get into the house. Arthur Weasley is no fool; he's got his house well warded."

Sirius shrugged. "The wards are set to recognize family members by sight, so it's no big mystery how the false Charlie got in. As for the rest, Hermione Granger told me that 'Charlie' spent the afternoon 'working in the garden'. I suspect what he was actually doing was taking the wards down. It wouldn't be too hard to do from on the property. And then, when he was done, he Summoned his Master." Sirius sighed, feeling weary. He raised his eyes and glanced around; he and Mad-Eye were alone in the dark corridor. "Has he got any family?"

"Who? The werewolf?"

Sirius nodded.

"Not that we can find a record of. Probably the best thing, too, considering..."

"Considering what?" asked Sirius sharply.

Mad-Eye wasn't looking at him, but down at the body of the man on the gurney. "He has injuries," he said. "On his hands. Not defensive injuries. As if he clawed his way out of something. A cage, some kind of holding pen. The glamour hid them. I suspect he was being Called. I suspect all the werewolves in Britain are being Called and that's what's behind this plague of werewolf sightings that's been in the news."

Sirius tensed. "That's an interesting theory." He had so far told no one about Lupin being Called, and didn't want to mention now that he might have any special knowledge of Calling, werewolves, Slytherin, or anything else. He knew this made no sense logically, and perhaps ethically as well, but he didn't care. He wasn't prepared to answer questions about Remus and that was final.

"It's not a pleasant process, being Called," said Mad-Eye, avoiding Sirius' eyes. "It's agonizing, and it goes on and on until the one being Called either answers the summons, or dies."

Sirius looked down, his hands tight on the metal edges of the gurney. The red gem in his bracelet winked as he turned his wrist. "Is there nothing that can be done for the condition?"



"There was talk of creating a potion to cure it, back when the Dark Lord was in power, but I don't know if anything ever came of that." Mad-Eye was still refusing to look at Sirius, who was glad. Mad-Eye cleared his throat. "And the Weasleys. How are they managing?"

"They're all right. They were frantic at first, still are probably, but the Burrow is knee-deep in Aurors right now. They'll have a constant twenty-four-hour guard of forty Aurors at least, ringed around the house and the grounds. There won't be a safer wizarding house in Britain."

"And will you be one of those Aurors?" Mad-Eye asked. Sirius suspected that Moody would have liked to be one himself, but in consideration of his age (103, by all accounts) Mad-Eye had lately been restricted to inactive duty.

Sirius shook his head, and looked down again at the body of the man on the gurney. Close up, it was easy to see the telltale signs that marked him as a werewolf: the glassy nails, the slightly elongated index fingers. Alexander Scroton was not the first dead werewolf Sirius had ever seen; nor, at this point, did he think he would be the last.

"No," said Sirius. "I'm going home. There's something I have to do."

\*\*\*

Hours had passed. The adamantine room was quiet. Harry was sleeping on a long wooden bench, his arm over his eyes. Draco stood by the wardrobe, looking at himself in the mirror that hung on the interior door.

Normally looking in mirrors was one of Draco's favorite activities, but at the moment he found himself vaguely troubled by the reflected image that met his gaze. He had taken some of the clothes from the wardrobe and changed into them, grateful to be rid of his bloodstained shirt. He now wore a shirt made of some tough, unfamiliar black material, black boots (a size too big, his feet slid around in them) and over that, a long black cloak that fastened across the chest with a silver chain whose links were tiny, interlaced

serpents. Dark green piping banded the hem of the cloak. It wasn't that he didn't look good in them (of course he looked good in them! - dashing and mysterious). It was that these were the clothes he had reached for instinctively when he had opened the wardrobe; the cloak was also the same his dream-self had worn, standing in the center of a circle of demons and bartering away his soul. He heard the demon voices again in his head: *There is a natural balance to all things. For every profit in one thing, payment in some other thing.* He raised his head, saw the mirrored image raise its head in answer, the blue light in the room giving his ashen skin and silver hair a dark, gunmetal sheen. *When will I have to pay? Or perhaps I should ask: What will I have to pay?*

He turned away from the mirror, and crossed the room to look at the tapestries on the wall. They were very beautiful in their own weird way - the largest was woven with silver and gold thread picked out against a background of black velvet; it showed stars and moons and constellations and galaxies and universes, whirling and glittering and drawing in the eye until you forgot what you were looking at and wandered through the spaces between the stars. Malfoy Manor had always been filled with things that were grand, but not many that were beautiful, and Draco found that looking at the tapestry touched him oddly. He put his hand out and felt the material, which was dusty and stiff and not nearly as nice to feel as to look at.

The other tapestries showed scenes of wizard court life and battle and hunting. There were various magical beasts depicted - dragons and basilisks, hippogriffs and werewolves, groups of veela riding huge beasts with lion bodies, heads like men, and scorpion tails. Draco didn't know what those were, but would not have wanted to meet one in a dark alley. The last tapestry showed a coat of arms: a silver dragon, rampant, facing to the sinister. The banner that wove beneath its feet bore a motto in Latin: IN HOC SIGNO VINCES. Draco poked at it with his finger, and found the tapestry as cold as ice to the touch.

He backed away, looking over at Harry, who was still sound asleep, and a vague sense of unease flitted over him. He suspected that

Harry might have a mild concussion - after Slytherin had Stunned Hermione, Harry had thrown himself at the dark wizard. Slytherin had promptly picked him up as if he had weighed no more than a kitten and thrown him headfirst against the opposite wall. At which point Draco could no longer quite recall what had happened. He had a feeling he and Ron had attacked Slytherin simultaneously, but his short-term memory seemed to be shot and he couldn't be sure.

Nor was he sure exactly what the symptoms of a concussion were. Harry had certainly seemed lucid enough before, and now that he was asleep he was sleeping soundly, his chest rising and falling with regular, shallow breaths. Of course, maybe sleeping soundly *was* a sign of a concussion. Suddenly uneasy, Draco got to his feet, went over to Harry, and jabbed a finger into his sternum.

"Ow!" Harry woke up with an indignant cry and fumbled for his glasses. "Malfoy, you creep. What was that for?" He sat up, looking injured, and rubbed at his solar plexus.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep, Potter."

"I can't," said Harry irritably. "I'm awake now." He put his glasses on and blinked at Draco. "What on earth are you wearing?"

Draco shrugged. "I changed into some of the clothes from the wardrobe over there."

"You're letting Salazar Slytherin dress you now?"

"Say what you will about the man - he may be a creepy, soulless, undead zombie with a weird thing for snakes, but he's got impeccable taste in clothing."

Any response Harry might have felt moved to give was cut off by a grinding noise coming from the vicinity of the opposite wall. Both of them spun around to see a dark opening appear in the wall, and a hand reach through it, holding something round and flat. There was a clang as it dropped what it was holding, and before the boys had time to do much more than stare in surprise, the hand was withdrawn and the dark opening vanished as swiftly as it had

appeared.

Draco darted over and knelt down by the dropped object, Harry following closely on his heels and looking curious. "What is it? A bomb?"

Draco shook his head. "Dinner." He grinned down at what had turned out to be a very ordinary-looking platter on which rested some sandwiches and a flask of water. "Cheese sandwiches, to be precise."

Harry looked mistrustfully at the food. "Malfoy, I don't think you should-"

"Oh, shut up. If he wanted us dead, he could have killed us while we were unconscious. You have thirty seconds, then I'm going to eat your half of the sandwiches."

Grumbling, Harry plonked himself down on the floor next to Draco. For the next few minutes, they ate in semi-companionable silence. A small squabble broke out over who got to eat the last sandwich, eventually resolved by a furious and silent tug-of-war which resulted in both parties getting far more cheese on their robes than they got in their mouths. Draco was busy trying to make his last sandwich half last when Harry suddenly looked at him with round eyes. "Malfoy, I've just had an idea."

"Did it hurt?" asked Draco good-naturedly.

Harry scrambled up onto his knees, brushing bits of cheese sandwich off his shirt. "Get me angry," he said.

Draco choked on his sandwich. "Pardon?"

"You heard me. Like last time, with the case in Lupin's office. Get me angry, maybe we can break down the walls. I bet you've got something up your sleeve that would really annoy me; you always do."

Draco shook his head. "It wouldn't work. You're wise to it now. If I told you something, you'd just figure I was lying."

*Not if you told me like this. You can't lie telepathically.* Harry was grinning now, his hair sticking up wildly. He reminded Draco of a cheerful bunny rabbit or some other fluffy little animal that didn't quite know how vulnerable it was. *Come on, it's a brilliant idea.*

"No," Draco heard himself say.

*Don't be a prat, Malfoy.*

Draco shook his head. "I won't do it."

"Come on," insisted Harry, catching at Draco's sleeve. "I bet it'll even be fun for you. You love winding me up."

"Potter, these walls could be ten feet thick for all we know. Do you know how hacked off you'd have to get?"

"Well, no one annoys me as much as you do," pointed out Harry, only half-joking.

Draco yanked his arm out of Harry's grasp and whirled to glare at him furiously, his voice coming out on a hiss. *"You don't know what you're asking."*

The ferocity in Draco's tone made Harry jump back. A look of hurt flitted across his face before he set his chin stubbornly. "Fine. Look, I was just joking. Don't get all wound up."

Harry sat back against the wall next to Draco, who was now staring furiously down at the half-sandwich that lay in his lap. After a moment of silence, he picked it up and, in a burst of childish irritation, threw it at Harry.

Harry looked down in surprise as the sandwich bounced off his arm.

"*That* was mature, Malfoy."

"So what?" Draco had his arms crossed over his chest and was glaring at the far wall. He knew he was being childish, but didn't feel able to do anything about it.

"I've had another idea."

"So have I, and it's that you should go away."

Harry ignored this. "Don't you want to hear my idea?"

"Is this another world-beater like your last one?"

"I want you to teach me how to use that sword."

Now Draco turned and looked at him. "What?"

Harry gestured towards Godric's sword, which was propped against a low rosewood table. "We've got two swords, and nothing else to do. I might as well learn."

Draco bit his lip. "The swords aren't bated..."

"Bated?"

"They should have beads on the tips...to keep them from being sharp. If you're going to learn on them."

"Did you learn on bated swords?"

"No," Draco admitted.

"Well, then." Harry walked over, picked up Godric's sword, and turned to face Draco. He presented an odd picture in his jeans, bloodstained shirt, and worn sneakers, the glittering, jewel-encrusted sword held tight in his right hand.

Draco sighed. "Fine, but we'll take it slowly. Hermione will not thank

me if I ruin your looks by slicing off your nose."

"Hermione would love me even if I had no nose," said Harry, with enviable conviction.

"And how much fun it will be," said Draco, getting to his feet and reaching for his own sword, "finding out if that's true or not. Shall we?"

\*\*\*

Ginny looked up as Ron came into the kitchen, carrying a blue-bound book in his hands.

"How's Hermione?" she asked.

"She must be all right. She gave me homework." He waved the book in his hand at them (*Tandy's Magical Reference Dictionary, Vol. S*). "I'm supposed to be looking up spells having to do with sleep. And dreaming."

"Anything so far?" asked Charlie, proffering a plate of biscuits.

Ron flopped into a chair. "Nothing about sleep spells, or dreams either, for that matter. Although if you want to make pastries invisible or Summon up a troupe of can-can dancers in luminous lederhosen, I'm your guy."

"Charlie?" It was Mrs. Weasley, standing in the doorway, wearing one of her more patched old robes and looking tired. She smiled when Ginny glanced up at her.

"Lo, Mum," said Charlie. "Tea?"

"No. There was just something I wanted to show you. I was cleaning up Percy's room, you know, to take my mind off things, and I found this in a pocket of his pajamas." She held out a folded white piece of paper. "It's addressed to Draco Malfoy."

Eyes widening, Charlie took the paper. "Thanks, Mum."

Mrs. Weasley smiled and left. Charlie began unfolding the paper. Ron craned his neck over to see get a better view. "What's it say?"

"Nose out, Ron," said Charlie, not unkindly, and started scanning the letter. As he read it, his face set into a strange expression.

"Come on," wheedled Ron. "What's Snape say? Is he dead? What?"

Ginny snorted. "Yes, Ron, because if Snape died, he'd be sure to write to Draco and tell him all about it."

"Don't be ridiculous," Charlie said, and grinned. "He'd be way too busy with the funeral to write."

"*Charlie*," groaned Ron, but Charlie, ignoring him, got to his feet, went over to the fireplace, and knelt down by the flames.

"*Auditori* Malfoy Mansion," he said, and after a few moments, Narcissa's head and shoulders appeared among the low flames. "Yes?" she said. She looked exhausted, her eyes ringed by black shadows. When she recognized Charlie, her dark eyes widened. "Is there any-"

"News? No," said Charlie, gently but firmly. "I'm sorry."

She bit her lip. "Is everything all right, then?"

"As well as can be expected. I've got something here I thought might be of interest to you and Sirius. Is he around?"

"He came home, but he went straight to the dungeons. I think he's checking on - well, the situation."

"Ah," said Charlie diplomatically, and held out the folded white square of paper. Narcissa reached a pale slender hand out of the fire and took it from him. "It's addressed to Draco," said Charlie. "From Snape."

Narcissa's eyes flicked up to Charlie, then back down to the letter.



"Apparently Snape brewed up some kind of Willpower potion for Draco," said Charlie. "To help him resist the pull of Slytherin. I thought Sirius might be interested--"

But Narcissa, clutching the parchment, had already vanished.

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*She dreamed she stood in a clearing at the heart of a forest, and in the center of the clearing was a tree. It was the greatest tree she could ever have imagined, and more than that. The giant roots rose above her head like the rafters of a monstrous hall. Beyond the she could see the huge twisted trunk of the tree going up and up and up, and far beyond that, so high that drifting clouds and distance made it hard to see, she could just make out the great dark shadowy spread of leaves and branches. A tiny black speck floated among them. As it drew closer she saw that it was a glittering flying thing - not a bird, but a small winged serpent with jeweled scales.*

*It landed on the earth a few feet from her, twisted, rippled, and became a man, standing. She felt no surprise; she had already known it would be him. He was pale, very pale,, and he wore dark green robes. Something was bound around his waist - a sword, she saw. He looked both contained and terribly tense, the skin of his face tight against the bones, his eyes, once silver, black now, fixed on hers.*

*"You called me here," he said, and his voice was unyielding. "What do you want?"*

*"I wanted to give you this," she said and held out in her hand something that glittered like a sparkling stone.*

*He made no move to take it. "So it is final, then?"*

*She nodded. "It's final. I will be your Source no longer."*

*"This is because of Godric," he said furiously.*

*"Godric has nothing to do with it."*

*"I could force you," he said ruminatively. "There are ways."*

*"An unwilling Source is useless," she said. "You know that."*

*"And it doesn't matter to you that I love you?"*

*She raised her chin. Glared at him. "You don't love me."*

*He crossed the clearing, seized her by the wrists, stared down at her. She looked at him, at his face, so changed now. She had thought he was gentle once, a feeling person, sensitive even. And there was sensitivity in his eyes, but only of the most narrow kind - sensitivity that felt only its own pain, comprehended only its own needs, suffered only when its desires were thwarted. "How can you say that to me?" he hissed.*

*"Because it's true. You don't love me. You simply want me like you want more power, more knowledge, more monstrous creatures to do your bidding. And that I love Godric, that only makes you want me more. That's not love, only avarice-"*

*He caught her by the hair and pulled her sharply against him. She tried to pull away, pushing at his hands as he grinned at her. "Fight me, why don't you," he hissed down at her. "Bite me, claw at me. But no, you can't bring yourself to hurt me. Not even in this."*

*"I can hurt you," she hissed back. "I will."*

*This had been the wrong thing to say. His eyes narrowed. "Yes, you are planning something, aren't you? You and the others. Godric, and Helga. I know it. I hear things."*

*"We're just protecting ourselves."*

*"Then why are you making Keys for a weapon?"*

*Her heart seemed to freeze inside her chest. She stared at him, her blood pounding out words: How does he know? How does he know?*

*His smile widened. "I have informants," he said. "Don't think you can do anything without my knowing about it. And don't think that just because I've lost you as my Source, I am weak." He grinned like a skull. "I have another Source of power now."*

*"Salazar, what-"*

*Her words were cut short as his mouth came down on hers. At first she grit her teeth to keep him out, but he had also cut off her breath, and eventually her lips parted to gain air. He tasted like cold metal. Horror assailed her, but even as it did her blood pounded hard in her ears and she wondered despairingly how the one person you loved best in the world could somehow become the person you most hated.*

*She turned her face away. "Let me go-"*

*But he had already pulled away from her, releasing her, laughing as she turned to run, and his laughter was the last thing she heard as she --*

The dream shifted.

*She was sitting in a room she recognized: the Great Hall at Hogwarts. Facing her across the table was a man she had never seen in dreams before, but knew immediately: dark hair, tall, dark eyebrows knitted together in a scowl. An honest, worried face. Dark green eyes. A number of items lay scattered across the table - books, parchment, quills, a mortar and pestle, the scabbard of a sword, the Lychen, an object that looked like an hourglass or an infinity sign.*

*"We're going to have to kill him, you realize," he said.*

*She shook her head vehemently. "No. I don't want to do that."*

*"There's no other way, Rowena."*

*"There is another way. Helga and I have been working on additions to the curse. Even should he be able to wake from it, to shake off the spell, he will not be able to leave the area we have bound him in. We will turn his own monsters against him and make them his guardians-"*

*"All this," said Godric. "All this just to keep him alive?"*

*"I can't kill him, Godric. I can't. There's still some good in him, something that can be redeemed, and while he is held I will discover how that can be accomplished-"*

*"So much effort expended to preserve a life that is worth so little," said Godric in a bitter tone. "The Dormiens Curse will not hold him. It binds the soul of a man. And I am not sure that he has much soul left for us to bind."*

*"There is one more thing," she heard her own voice say, haltingly.*

*Godric looked up. "What?"*

*She met his gaze squarely. "Have you ever heard of an Epicyclical Charm?"*

*Hermione felt her own sleeping body jump in shock, and if as a result of that shock Godric's face wavered and vanished. She tried to clutch at the shreds of the dream, but heard only voices echoing in her head, clear if muffled, like voices heard in another room; Helga's, her own: "We will have to prepare faster, that's all. The Lycanthe is ready, the Turner, now we just need Godric's Key." The voices rose to a jumbled scream. "What Source is he using, if not me? Where would he find another Magid willing to be his Source?" "Maybe it's not a Magid at all. Demonic power. He could have called upon something....." " We need to hide the Keys." "Helga can hide them. She knows how to put up wards." "There is so little time-"*

*"Hermione."*

*Someone had her by the wrist, and was saying a name, but it wasn't*

her name, or was it? She blinked her eyes open and saw a formless dark mass of shadows, which resolved itself slowly into a black-and-white Ron, sitting on the edge of her bed and peering at her anxiously. "*Hermione*."

Dizzily, she reached out and caught at him with her free hand, pulling him forward with such force that he nearly overbalanced. "How--" she caught herself on a ragged gasp, and closed her eyes, her heart pounding. "I was dreaming," she said, half to him, half to herself.

Ron pulled back slightly, sitting up but not taking his hand off her wrist. "I figured. You were shouting - actually you were yelling for, um, Godric. Would that be Godric Gryffindor, and is there something I should be telling Harry, because I really don't think-

Hermione hit her head gently against his shoulder. 'Shut *up*.' Ron sighed, but didn't move. She could hear the gentle thump-thump sound of his heart, steady as a metronome, reliable as Ron himself. "I heard all these voices," she whispered, looking up at him. "Rowena and Godric - they were talking about the Keys, and where they were hidden. I think Ginny's right, I think there's something on the grounds here, maybe in the cellar-

"Hermione," cut in Ron. "*They're just dreams*."

"No." Hermione spoke firmly. "They're not just dreams." She reached out, took hold of the Lycanthe, and held it out to Ron. "This *connects* me to them. To Harry and especially to Draco. I could dream what he was dreaming, maybe I can see what he's seeing. Anyway, I'm learning from it. I'm beginning to understand how everything is linked together - how what happened in the past is affecting what's happening now."

She paused. Ron was looking at her steadily, and she thought she saw concern in his clear blue eyes. "Hermione," he said slowly. "Don't take this the wrong way, but - you seem a little too - intense about this. I don't know what that thing is-" he jerked his chin towards the Lycanthe - "but you're looking at it the way Draco looked at that sword of his. I don't like it."

"Not all power is bad, Ron."

"Maybe not," he said, detaching himself from her and standing up. "But how can you tell the difference?"

She shivered a little, although it wasn't cold in the room, and tugged at her sleeve. Ron had given her a pair of Fred's old pajamas, and over that she wore the sweater that Mrs. Weasley had knitted Harry for Christmas their fourth year. It was emerald green with an embroidered dragon that snaked across the front. Harry had worn it once last summer at the Burrow and they had all laughed at him - he had grown so much that the sleeves of the sweater rode up over his wrists and an inch gap of skin showed between the bottom of the sweater and the waistband of his jeans. Laughing, Harry had stashed the sweater in the back of Ron's closet, where it had remained until tonight.

She liked wearing it - it was warm, it was familiar, it smelled like Harry. She had always thought people pretty much smelled like the soap they used, but had come to realize that wasn't true -- Ron always smelled like a combination of cut grass and buttered toast, Draco like cloves and pepper and lemon zest, and Harry smelled like soap and chocolate and some other scent that was just uniquely Harry and somehow alleviated the sick sense of missing him. Not entirely, of course. But a little.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I'm not sure I can." She raised her head and looked at Ron, who was standing by the window now, looking out at the garden. "And I'm afraid."

Ron looked over at her. Faint moonlight traced the shadows under his eyes, lined his lashes with silver, turned his hair black. "Come here," he said.

Hermione stood up and went to join him at the window.

"Look outside," he said.

She followed his gaze. Outside the moonlight was so piercingly white

that the garden almost looked as if it were buried in snow. The trees were edged in silver; the light of the moon so bright it snuffed out the stars. But that wasn't what Ron had been pointing at; he was indicating the solid line of black-cloaked figures that stood in a ring around the garden, their backs to the house. Aurors. They stood so still they resembled standing stones.

"Doesn't that make you feel a little bit less afraid?" asked Ron, and Hermione looked at him, thinking that he still didn't understand that she wasn't afraid of what was outside so much as she was afraid of what was inside - inside her, inside Draco, inside Harry and Ginny, what engraved pattern of history, genetics and destiny they might carry inside them, inescapable, endlessly repeating. She looked past him, out of the window, towards the garden where the moonlight glinted off the water of the quarry in the distance.

Suddenly she swung around, and looked wildly at Ron. She found that she was clutching the Lycanthe in her right hand, so tightly she could feel the points digging into her palm. "Ron. The *quarry*."

"What about it?"

"The wards."

"What about the wards?" asked Ron, sounding vaguely exasperated. "Or is this one of those games where you say a word and I'm supposed to respond with the first thing that pops into my mind?"

"No, it's not a game. Ron, you said that every time your parents tried to empty out the quarry it just filled itself up again, right? It's got some sort of magical wards on it, really powerful ones if your parents couldn't break them. Now what if those wards were put in place to protect something that's under the quarry? Something that was put there...a thousand years ago?"

Ron stared at her for a moment. Then a grin flashed across his face, lighting his eyes. "And all this time I thought you were just faking being clever."

Hermione grinned back. "Have you got a shovel?"

\*\*\*

Sirius stood in the dungeon, the demon at his back, through the bars of its cell he faced the werewolf that had been Lupin. It had ceased flinging itself against the bars some time ago and now crouched, narrow-eyed and whimpering at intervals, at the far side of the cell.

Sirius stood, an object in each of his hands, and looked at the wolf, and heard Mad-Eye's voice in his head. *It's not a pleasant process, being Called. It's agonizing, and it goes on and on until the one being Called either answers the summons, or dies.*

Slowly, he raised his left hand, in which something flashed and glittered through the murky underwater light of the dungeon. "I found this in my vault at Gringott's," he said softly, not looking at the wolf, but at what he held in his hand. It was a key, made out of brass, with a head carved of bone into which had been set a number of sparkling dark jewels. "James gave it to me to give to Harry. The problem being, of course, that Harry isn't around for me to give it to him and James isn't around to tell me what it's supposed to be for. And I don't know what to do with the blasted thing myself. It's obviously magical, but a key, even a magical key, isn't much bloody good without a lock, is it? Now, I know what you'd say, Moony. 'Sirius, you're being obvious.' 'Sometimes a key isn't just a key.' And sometimes a boy isn't just a boy, sometimes he's a wolf, too. That's something I learned from you. I always told you it wasn't that important. But maybe I was wrong." Sirius paused, aware that he was rambling, and leaned his head against the cold bars of the cell. "Oh, what's the point? You don't understand a word I'm saying."

As he leaned forward, the wolf whimpered, and skittered back.

"He fears you," said the demon at Sirius' back. "He knows why you have come."

"And how do *you* know?" snarled Sirius, not turning around.

"I see what you are holding in your right hand. Do you think you



can slay a werewolf with such a blade? It is not silver."

Sirius turned around slowly and looked at the demon with bleak black eyes. "You'd be surprised how many things a knife to the heart will kill."

"The Killing Curse is cleaner," observed the demon.

"He deserves better than that," said Sirius. He was still looking down at the knife, which he had taken from Lucius' armory because it was the finest weapon he could find, and because the opals in the hilt reminded him of moons, and it seemed fitting.

But in truth, it wouldn't matter what kind of weapon he killed his friend with. He would still be dead.

*He'd do it for me*, Sirius thought. But the thought lacked the resonance it had had before.

The demon chuckled. "You cannot do it."

Sirius ignored it.

"Perhaps," said the demon, "there might be another way?"

The demon shrugged. "Very well. I did not come here to bargain."

"What *did* you come here for?" snarled Sirius. "You said you didn't come to kill Harry, but you tried to-"

"I was not trying to kill him! I was trying to *warn* him!"

"You attacked him!"

"I tried to make him *listen*. I tried to tell him that his life was in danger from the Snake Lord. But he and the other, the seventh son, they did not want to hear me."

Sirius stood motionless, his heart beating hard. Surely the creature

was lying - and yet- "Why?" he demanded. "What do you care what happens to Harry?"

The demon shrugged. "We do not care. You are asking the wrong questions."

Sirius took a step forward, his eyes fixed on the demon's red ones. "Who are 'we'? What's your name, anyway? Do you even have one?"

The demon looked shiftily. "Very well. As a sign of good will I will tell you my name. It is Strygalldwir. Conjure with it and I will eat your heart and liver."

Sirius doubted he'd be doing much conjuring with a name he couldn't even pronounce. "So what does Slytherin want with Harry?" demanded Sirius, and by reflex glanced down at the red jewel in his bracelet, which pulsed with a steady light. "And what is the interest of Hell in these proceedings?"

"We are owed a life," said the demon. "The bargain made with the Snake Lord was that most binding of bargains: the gift of demonic power in exchange for-"

"His life," said Sirius. "After a set term of years. I get it."

The demon giggled. "Not *his* life," it sneered. "Who would make a bargain like that?"

"Then...?"

"The life of his heir. Specifically, a Magid descendant of his own blood. That was the bargain. That was why Slytherin, when alive, was desperate to produce an heir. Once he gives his own descendant's life freely to us, we have no choice but to consider the debt cancelled."

"Draco," whispered Sirius, and then, after a moment, realizing, raised his head and stared. "*Harry?*"

"Why not?" Strygalldwir was grinning, showing more than one set of

teeth. It was not a pleasant grin. "Both boys are Magid descendants of Slytherin's blood. But the Potter boy also has Godric's blood in him. The Snake Lord needs to keep one boy alive and by his side, but the other will be a sacrifice. Slytherin's hatred of his cousin knew no bounds. He would consider it a nice irony to use Godric's heir for such a purpose. It will be as if Godric himself has set him free."

"What do you care if he uses Harry to fill his bargain?" Sirius snarled. "What difference does it make to you?"

"Because," said the demon, red eyes whirling, "this bargain was made a thousand years ago, when we were rich in items of True Magic and poor in Magids. The art of making Living Blades is long lost. That sword is one of two remaining in the world, and is far more valuable to us than the life of a Magid child. There are plenty," added Strygalldwir, "of Magids around these days. But we cannot take the sword back unless Slytherin forfeits his bargain. And he that will not happen until--

Sirius interrupted, shaking his head. "In other words, you'd simply rather have the sword than Harry. Very nice."

"I'm a demon. We're not interested in nice. Anyway, it's too late for Godric's heir. The Snake Lord has him now."

Sirius' head was swimming. *Why does Slytherin need one boy alive and by his side?* he thought, and then he remembered Remus' voice, saying the words of the prophecy, *When the sword is once again wielded in battle by a descendant of Slytherin, Slytherin himself will return, and he and his descendant will join together to wreak havoc and terror on the wizarding world.*

Remus. He turned back to the other cell, where the werewolf lay. It bared its teeth at him as he approached, its dark eyes wide with ferocity or pain or some combination of the two.

"Are you going to kill him, finally?" drawled the demon at Sirius' back.

"No," replied Sirius, shoving the knife he had been holding through the loop of his belt. "I'm going to let him out. If he runs to Slytherin, so be it."

"He'll tear you apart," said the demon, sounding impressed, either by Sirius' bravery or his stupidity, Sirius wasn't sure.

"Maybe," said Sirius. "Maybe not."

He reached for the cell door -

"*Sirius!*"

It was Narcissa. She stood at the entrance to the dungeon, very pale in her white robes.

"Sirius," she said again, catching her breath, and he realized she had been running. "I think you should read this-" and she held out the folded piece of paper in her hand.

\*\*\*

"Ron, be quiet, you'll wake everyone up! Stop clomping your feet."

"I'm not clomping. I'm just walking."

"Well, walk more quietly."

Ron rolled his eyes. Hermione, of course, couldn't see this, since the kitchen was pitch dark. "Come on, Hermione, everyone's asleep."

"Except us, of course," said a voice out of the darkness.

Ron and Hermione both jumped, and stared. The kitchen was suddenly bright with light, revealing Charlie and Ginny sitting together at the kitchen table, looking at them very much askance. Charlie was holding his wand, from which bright glowing light emanated.

"What are you doing sitting here with the lights off?" Ron demanded indignantly.

"We heard you two whispering while you were coming down the stairs," said Ginny, looking superior. "Thought we'd give you a bit of a scare. Ron, why are you carrying a shovel?"

Charlie's raised eyebrow look had turned into a smug sort of grin. "What *are* you two doing? Sneaking down here for an illicit midnight snog?"

Ron choked, and turned brick red. Hermione merely looked annoyed. "Of course we are," she snapped sarcastically. "That's why we brought the shovel. They come in *so* handy during snog sessions."

Ginny grinned. "What *were* you planning on doing with that shovel?"

"I was going to stick this end in the ground," said Ron, gesturing, "and then I was going to start digging. I'd tell you more, but after that it gets a little technical."

"All right," said Charlie, standing up. "you have five minutes to explain to me what you're doing sneaking outside in the wee hours of the night with a shovel. Starting now."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Ron shrugged. Hermione sighed, turned back to Charlie and Ginny, and explained.

When she was done, Charlie scratched his head, looking somewhat woeful. "You realize you can't get to the quarry? The Aurors are under strict instructions to keep us all inside."

There was a doleful silence, which was broken by Ginny. "There might be another way," she said slowly.

Ron perked up his ears. "What do you mean?"

"When I was down in the cellar yesterday, I noticed when I went

down one corridor that the ceiling got damper and damper, and after awhile it started to drip water on me. I think I was going *under* the quarry."

Hermione clapped her hands. "Gin, you're brilliant. Let's go."

Ron looked green. "Down into the cellar?" he echoed faintly.

"What's wrong with the cellar?" Hermione demanded.

Ron gestured faintly. "Spiders..."

"I'll protect you, Ron," said Charlie, heroically. "Besides," he added, dropping his voice, "I'm dying to see if Fred and George still keep their magazine collection down there."

\*\*\*

As it turned out, Draco was not a bad teacher. Harry was surprised. He would have thought that Draco would have been -well, like Snape, cranky and impatient and demanding. He *was* impatient, but he was also meticulous and careful and had insisted Harry start at the very beginning - how to stand, how to salute, how to hold his sword. He had insisted Harry take his shoes off so he could better show him how to stand, and had taken his own shoes off so that when they fought, they would be the same height.

He also, Harry suspected, was cheating. Not in any way that he could exactly put a finger on, but it seemed to Harry that as he himself used the sword, moves that he had never learned flickered in the back of his mind - less their names than a series of electrical impulses that his brain wanted to follow, and a second later he would find that his arm had leaped forward almost of its own accord.

He supposed it was possible that he was simply an amazingly fast learner with an innate knowledge of swordfighting techniques, but he rather suspected that that was not the case. Every time it happened, though, he would glance up and find Draco looking at him blankly and expectantly as if to say, "Yes? What? Why are you

goggling at me, Potter?"

Eventually he decided not to worry about it. It Draco wanted to teach him better swordfighting through telepathy, more power to him. It wasn't as if that made it easy. It was still hard work. Godric's sword was heavy, very heavy, and learning to move in this new way was cramping his muscles. He was soaked in sweat - so was Draco, though - and his shirt was sticking to him.

"Okay," announced Draco suddenly, breathing hard and backing up a few steps. "One more time. Try to get past me."

Harry sighed, turned around, and faced Draco, who saluted him. Feeling silly, Harry copied the gesture, not too awkwardly.

The moment Draco moved, Harry moved too. He had a feeling Draco was helping him again, although he couldn't see anything in Draco's expression to support that. Draco looked calm, concentrated, a little bored, even as whatever Harry was doing with his own weapon caused him to retreat. Harry followed after him, hearing the clang of metal on metal with a certain sharp pleasure. Draco raised his blade - Harry pushed it aside with his own, stepped forward, suddenly realized his feet were placed wrong, and moved to correct them. Before he had finished this, the flat of Draco's sword banged into his shoulder. It hurt, too.

"Ow," said Harry grouchily, stepping back.

Draco pushed a strand of sweaty white-blond hair out of his eyes and frowned. "Come on Potter, a reasonably trainable hamster could have completed that move. I left you an opening bigger than Millicent Bulstrode's -"

"My feet were wrong," snapped Harry, even more grouchily.

A grin quirked the corner of Draco's mouth. "Yeah, I noticed that. Well, it does take a certain amount of grace to learn to fence."

"I've got grace," said Harry, stung.

"Remember, Potter - I've watched you dance. The whole school had to watch you dance, fourth year. Graceful is *not* your middle name."

Indignantly, Harry opened his mouth to reply - and was cut off as another loud grinding noise emanated from the corner of the room. Both the boys whirled around, holding their swords. This time, the dark space grew larger than it had before, large enough for a person to walk through. Harry and Draco stood frozen, looking at each other.

Draco spoke first. *What should we do?*

*Protect ourselves. Stand back to back.*

Draco put his hands on his hips. *And that would accomplish precisely what?*

Harry shrugged. *I don't know. It's what they do in movies.*

There was a flicker of movement in the dark space, and suddenly a figure emerged into the room. Harry and Draco didn't move. They just stared. The figure wore long robes of indigo blue, over which was swathed a hooded black cloak that hid the newcomer's face. It was possible to see that the intruder was small, but too slender to be Wormtail, and the hands that extended from the sleeves of its dark robe were both human.

Harry heard Draco's voice in his head. *This can't be good.*

He was inclined to agree. Suddenly, the dark space vanished, the wall reappearing, and the intruder turned to face the two boys; it put its two pale hands to the sides of its hood, and drew the hood back.

Hair like a cloud of silver threads spilled out, framing a familiar



porcelain face. Dark blue eyes raised themselves haughtily, black lashes sweeping low. "I would 'ave thought," and the light voice was icy, "that you two would 'ave been working out some clever escape plan by now, seeing 'as you are both Magids, and not too 'opelessly stupid. But no, 'ere you are, banging away at each other with silly great swords." The red mouth frowned in disgust. "*Boys.*"

There was a clang. Draco had dropped his sword in amazement. "*Fleur?*" he demanded, shock having stripped the drawl from his voice. "What are you doing here?"

\*\*\*

They had been down in the cellar for about thirty minutes before they reached the door. Ginny was leading the way, her wand out and glowing, Charlie behind her. Then came Hermione, who had discovered that she could use the Lycanthe a bit like a torch - it glowed when she lifted it in her hand. Then came Ron, muttering slightly, but looking around with great interest. It really wasn't so much a cellar as a warren of tunnels and passages. It was a good thing, thought Hermione, that Ginny seemed to know where she was going or they'd all be lost.

Hermione also noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping increasingly downward as they went, and that, as Ginny had said, the walls were getting wetter and more covered in moss, the air colder and filled with a dampish white mist.

Ron suddenly gave a startled yell, and Hermione whirled around. "Ron! You all right?"

Ron, looking greenish in the light of the Lycanthe, was staring down at his foot with a look of horror. "Spider," he said in a choked sort of voice. "Crawled up under my trouser leg."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Ron!" she snapped and dropped down to her knees at his feet. She yanked up his trouser leg and removed the offending arachnid from his ankle. It was a very small spider, pale gray and rather cute. "Look," she said, waving it at Ron, who hopped backward. "It's just a teeny little

spider! It was probably just looking for somewhere warm."

Ron glared back at her. "*You* don't understand. You never had to go into the Forbidden Forest and nearly get eaten by a spider the size of a Mini, just because Harry's an idiot."

Hermione stood up and made a face at him. "Harry's not an idiot."

Ron just looked at her.

She sighed. "Oh, all right, he is. But not all the time."

"Hey!" came Charlie's voice from further down the corridor. "Come here and look at this!"

"What is it?" asked Hermione, coming up to Ginny, and immediately saw what the problem was: the passageway ended in a huge stone door. Well, not a very useful door, as it had no knob or other way of opening it, but it was still, quite evidently, a door. All along the front of it were carved deep grooves and scratches, weaving themselves into a mesmerizing design.

"Dead end," said Ron behind her, sounding gloomy.

"Not necessarily," said Hermione. "I don't think it's a dead end. I think it's an obstacle."

"And the difference would be?"

"That there's a way to get past it."

"This looks like writing," interrupted Ginny, leaning closer with her wand. Hermione bent down, tracing the grooves in the stone with her finger, and brought the light close to the foot of the wall. There was a design there, etched into the corner of the stone: it looked like a tiny weasel or a badger, wearing a crown on its little head. *Hufflepuff*, she thought, stepping back and raising the Lycanthe in her hand. Golden light spilled from it, illuminating the carving of the little animal, and beside it, several scratched lines in a language she didn't know.

Hermione lowered the Lycanthe, biting her lip.

Ginny glanced up irritably. "Why did you do that? I was reading it."

"But Ginny, it doesn't make any sense! It's just lines and squiggles."

Ginny looked up at her, shocked. "It makes perfect sense. It's some kind of poem, or a riddle. Bring the light back down here."

Startled, Hermione knelt down next to Ginny, and Charlie crowded down next to them. "It looks like gibberish to me," said Ron, looking doubtful, and Charlie agreed.

Ginny shook her head, her red hair catching the wavering wandlight in darting red points of fire. "No. It's a poem. Here--" And she read it out:

*When there is fire in me then I am still cold  
When I own your true love's face then you will not see me.  
To all things I give no more than I am given.  
In time I may have all things, and yet I can keep nothing.*

There was a long silence. Hermione expelled her breath in amazement. "It's a riddle," she said.

"What kind of riddle is *that*?" Ginny demanded, sitting back on her heels. "It's not even a question."

"The question is implied," put in Charlie. "It's describing a thing, or a person we have to identify."

Ron grinned. "And it couldn't just have asked 'what's red and green and goes round and round?'"

Hermione squeezed his arm impatiently. "Shh. Everybody think. *To all things I give no more than I am given. In time I may have all things, and yet I can keep nothing....*so it's not a person, then..."

Ron looked at her with concern. "Herm, if you answer wrong, you don't know what will happen. It could be dangerous."

"Ron's right," agreed Charlie, looking nervously up and around at the wet, cold walls, the heavy-hanging shadows.

Hermione ignored them both. *When there is fire in me then I am still cold. When I own your true love's face then you will not see me...* At the words 'true love' she had of course thought of Harry, and was thinking of him still, of looking into the Mirror of Erised and seeing Harry there, his arms around her reflected image, looking down at her, both their faces cast back at her...

"*Hermione*," said Ron. "Are you listening?"

Hermione raised her head. "A mirror," she said.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a creaking noise, the door swung wide, revealing a long, narrow, deeply-slanted passageway twisting down into darkness.



\*\*\*

*What is she doing here?* Harry demanded, his eyes like dinner plates.

Draco was still staring at Fleur. She looked much the same as she

had the last time he had seen her; if anything, she was more beautiful now, and certainly she was more ticked-off looking. *I dunno*, he thought back. *She's a veela, isn't she? Maybe she got Called here. Either that, or she's here because she's in love with me.*

*She's in love with you?*

*Obsessed with me might be a bit more accurate. She can't go five minutes without trying to get her hands on my -*

*I get it*, Harry interrupted hastily. *No need to elaborate. You can't honestly think she's come all the way here just to get her hands on your scrawny body?*

Draco looked insulted. *Is that so hard to believe?*

"Oh!" With a cry of what sounded very much like indignation, Fleur flew across the room, and, with an almighty *crack!* slapped Draco hard across the face. So hard in fact, that he staggered backwards and almost tripped.

Both Draco and Harry looked at her in astonishment, Draco with his hand clapped to his cheek, on which the mark of Fleur's blow stood out like a scarlet handprint. "What was that for?" he cried indignantly.

Fleur stood with her hands on her hips, her chest heaving (which, in Draco's opinion, couldn't be considered all bad), her eyes bright with rage. "You!" she spat, glaring at Draco. "For one thing, I can hear everything you two are saying! I am a Magid, remember?"

"Oh," said Draco, exchanging astonished glances with Harry. "We didn't know-"

"Slytherin couldn't hear us," said Harry, looking startled. "Could he?"

Fleur ignored this. She had worked up a good head of steam and was still glaring at Draco, her eyes spitting agate-blue sparks. "For another thing, it is not very nice to give someone a gift that just *disappears!*"

Draco's eyes flashed. "It wasn't a gift! You extorted it from me."

"You owed me! And now you still do!"

"I don't suppose anyone wants to enlighten me as to what this is all about," muttered Harry, but Draco and Fleur were too busy glaring at each other to pay any attention to him.

"I gave you what you asked for!"

Suddenly Fleur smiled. "Not *exactly* what I 'ad asked you for."

"All right. The second thing you asked for. I gave you the sword. It's not my fault it came back to me."

"You knew it would."

"Fleur. You're better off without it."

"Don't you patronize me, Draco Malfoy, you 'orrible person. I knew the minute I saw that sword 'ow powerful it was. But you didn't tell me you were linked to it. All it tried to do from the moment you gave it to me was get back to you. I 'ad to sleep with it tied to my arm! And even then it kept me up all night. I 'ad to let it go back to you. But not before I took this from it," and she held up something in her hand that shimmered a darker green than Harry's eyes. Draco knew what it was immediately; the missing emerald from the hilt of the sword. "This is 'ow I found you," added Fleur, sounding smug, and opened her hand. The emerald flew out of it, and with a soft *plonk* sound, rejoined the hilt of the sword. In a moment, it looked as if it had never been pried loose.

"That begs the question of how you managed to get in here," added Harry, looking suspiciously at Fleur.

"It was not difficult. I am a veela. The Snake Lord just assumed I was Called 'ere. He doesn't know I'm a Magid, and therefore I cannot be Called. There are 'undreds, perhaps thousands, of Dark creatures 'ere. I was not noticed. When you arrived 'ere this morning, the emerald sought you out. I seduced the guard stationed in front of your door, and 'ere I am. I 'ave come," she announced, "to rescue you."

She smiled proudly. Both Draco and Harry stared at her in amazement.

"Fleur," said Draco finally. "I don't know whether to kiss you or run away from you in terror."

"You 'ad your chance with the kissing," she said serenely. "You missed it. You still owe me, Draco," and her voice was steely. "I will not let you die 'ere before you pay me back."

"This is all terribly interesting," said Harry. "But do you know how to get us out of this room?"

Fleur nodded. "In five minutes the guard will open that door back up for me. We go through it, and then I will lead you out of 'ere. The Snake Lord, 'e was not going to come for you until midnight. We 'ave some time."

Harry was looking at her with narrowed his green eyes. "Slytherin was going to come for us in here?"

Fleur nodded.

Harry turned to Draco. "Maybe we should stay."

Draco stared at him. "Stay here?"

Harry nodded.

"He beat us before because we weren't prepared. Now we're prepared and armed. I think we should stay here and when he



arrives, attack him. He can't use magic in here either. We'll be equal, and there are more of us. It's the last thing he'll expect."

"No," snapped Draco, "the last thing he'll expect is for us to obtain round fur hats and go caroling up and down the halls of his stronghold, spreading Christmas cheer. And your plan makes about as much sense. But thank you for sharing."

"Arry," said Fleur gently. "It does not make sense. He 'as thousands of minions 'ere. Even if you could beat 'im, you would 'ave to deal with them. The best thing we can do now is escape."

Harry looked at Draco, and Draco could see from the expression on his face that Harry wanted to tell him something, but couldn't because anything he said, no matter how he said it, would be overheard by Fleur. "Potter-" Draco began.

The grinding noise interrupted him. Behind Fleur, a large dark opening was appearing in the wall. She tossed her silver hair back, and held out a hand to them, looking impatient. "Come on," she urged, backing towards the "door." "We must go."

With one last glance over at Harry, Draco went after her. And, after a moment, Harry followed suit.



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*"Reparo."*

Snape watched as the shattered bits of his record fitted themselves back together. Within a moment, it looked as it had before Draco Malfoy had broken it.

Snape was sitting at the desk in his dusty living room. The windows were closed firmly against the dark night air outside, and the room was full of dull light. He had not been in here for several days. Not since he had found his favorite student sitting on the floor there, eyes like blank mirrors, playing Bach's Goldberg Variations by spinning a record above his hand.

He wondered if he should regret telling the boy so harshly that his

father was dead. But no, he had had to do something to snap Draco back to reality. He had looked as if he were drifting off, unmoored. Snape had seen that look before in the eyes of Voldemort's servants. Sometimes one could come back from that. Sometimes not. Draco had come back, but for how long?

He knew the boy had gotten the package he had sent containing a flask of the new Willpower potion he had developed, and the note explaining what it did - that it was stronger, lasted longer - because his owl had returned. But it had brought no note with it. He realized with an odd sort of pang at the heart that he was worried about the boy. It had been a long time since he had been worried about anyone.

*Bang. Bang.*

It was a moment before he realized that the insistent pounding noise was coming from the front door, and not from his own head. Slowly, he got to his feet, drawing his robes tighter around him. It was cold in his house. He liked it that way.

He went quickly down the hallway towards the front door, where the pounding was growing louder and more insistent by the moment. He reached out his hand for the knob-

And paused.

He had never loved anyone so much that he could simply sense their presence, or recognize them instantly in a crowd no matter how changed they might be, although he had heard of such things. But hatred he knew intimately, and so he knew who was standing on his porch even as he reached out for the knob and drew the door open, knew by the change in the air around him, knew even from the sound of his visitor's knock.

The man standing on the porch looked exhausted. More than exhausted. His dark eyes were ringed by blacker shadows, his black hair disheveled and awry, his mouth set in a tense hard line. And

yet somehow this made him look not older, but younger than he was, reminding Snape of the boy he had known at school. *So you really want to know where James and Remus and Peter and I go when we sneak off the grounds? Well come on, then, Severus. I'll show you.*

Sirius Black raised his head, and for the first time in twenty years, looked Snape straight in the eyes, and Snape saw that in his hand Sirius held a folded white piece of paper with Snape's own handwriting on it.

"I need your help," he said.

#### References:

1)"We'll always be stupid." He paused. "Okay, not everybody rush to disagree." -- Buffy

2)" Scrumdilyumptious Chocolate Bar." Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Roald Dahl.

3)The best-selling autobiography "Why I Like to Do It With Girls" - Blackadder

4) "It is Strygalldwir. Conjure with it and I will eat your heart and liver." - Roger Zelazny, The Guns of Avalon.

6)"I was going to stick this end in the ground," said Ron, gesturing, "and then I was going to start digging. I'd tell you more, but after that it gets a little technical." Terry Pratchett, Thief of Time

7) Bindings and Summonings: Neil Gaiman's Books of Magic 8)  
*When there is fire in me then I am still cold.*

*When I own your true love's face then you will not see me.  
To all things I give no more than I am given.  
In time I may have all things, and yet I can keep nothing. – a classic riddle*

Draco Sinister

Chapter Eleven - The Sleep of Reason

*The sleep of reason brings forth monsters.*

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"I need your help," Sirius Black said.

Without a word, Snape shut the door firmly in Sirius' face.

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It was so clingingly wet in the corridors under the Burrow that Ginny felt as if every breath she took filled lungs with water. She could hear Ron, Hermione and Charlie behind her, splashing through the puddles that became increasingly deep, Ron muttering under his breath as he went. They were talking, but she didn't join in. She was concentrating on following the very slight, very insistent tugging sensation in the center of her chest, pulling her forward.

"So what exactly happened to Helga Hufflepuff?" Charlie was asking. He was holding his wand high above their heads, lighting the path in front of them. Of all of them, he was the driest, since his tough dragonhide trousers kept off the water.

"Slytherin killed her," said Hermione, who had given up trying to stay dry and was splashing through the puddles as if she enjoyed it. "He killed Godric, too. And Rowena, but that wasn't on purpose. Not," she added hastily, "that that makes it all right. I'm just saying."

"He seems to have regarded homicide as not just a job, but a hobby," said Ron, still keeping a watchful eye out for spiders.

"Well, he was a general," said Hermione. "He had his own army. He killed people all the time. I suppose he just," she shuddered, "got a taste for it."

"Not to mention," put in Charlie, "that when you can flatten entire cities at a whim, a tendency towards quiet reflection and seeing-things-from-the-other-fellow's-point-of-view is seldom necessary."

"That's true," Hermione agreed.

Ginny suddenly paused, and the rest of them paused with her. They were at a place where the corridor split off into a triple-branched fork: left, right, and straight ahead.

"What's up Gin?" Ron demanded.

"I can't quite feel which way to go," said Ginny, a little anxiously. The tugging feeling seemed to have gone for the moment, and she suddenly felt cold and rather damp.

"Well, you must have some idea," said Ron, a bit peevishly.

"Ron," said Charlie, warningly.

Ginny shook her head. "No, I..."

"Well, let's go straight ahead then," announced Ron, walking past her. Ginny hesitated for a moment, and was about to follow after him when, having taken no more than twenty steps down the corridor, Ron suddenly vanished.

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"And you *trust* her?"

Draco rolled his eyes as Harry hissed in his ear. They stood side by side, flattened against the wall of the wide stone corridor outside their erstwhile prison cell. Fleur was down at the end of the corridor, peering anxiously around the corner.

Harry shivered. Malfoy Manor was old, so was Hogwarts, but this place was ancient; age seemed to seep, like cold, from its very stones. It was dim, too - torches burned in brackets on the wall, but not very many and not bright. He knew now from Fleur that they

were at the castle in the forest where Hermione had been held prisoner; Draco had even claimed that he recognized the corridor they were standing in from his previous visit, but then he had stopped, blinked, shaken his head, and announced, "It's the same castle all right, but it looks...different."

Harry had decided it was better to ignore him if he wasn't going to say anything helpful.

"And you don't?" Draco hissed back.

"About as far as I could throw Hagrid. Come on, Malfoy. She's an airhead, she's boy-crazy, what makes you think she could formulate such an involved rescue plan?"

"She was a Triwizard champion," Draco pointed out reasonably.

"So was I, and you always tell me all my plans are crap."

"All your plans *are* crap. You don't think she might be a blessing in disguise?"

"Well, if she is, it's a very good disguise."

"Any disguise involving a push-up bra is A-okay with me. Unless of course we're talking about Hagrid in disguise, and I just went to a very dark mental place here... Distract me, Potter. Say something."

"Fleur's coming back," said Harry, pushing himself off the wall.

Fleur smiled at them as she hurried up, her silver hair bouncing in thick waves on her shoulders. "*Allons-y*," she directed, gesturing that they should follow her. "The 'allway is clear. Come on."

"What I wouldn't give for my dad's Invisibility Cloak," muttered Harry, as they raced along the corridor, sticking close to the wall, dashed around the corner, and followed Fleur as she yanked a large door open, and pelted inside. She closed the door behind them, and leaned against it.

They were in a narrow stairwell whose stone spiral stairs led down into darkness. It was so dim Harry could only see Draco and Fleur as vague shadowy outlines, both crowned with silver hair that shone like beacons in the darkness. He reached into his pocket and felt for his wand -

"No," said Fleur urgently, grasping his wrist. "No magic."

"Why not?"

"There are wards up all over this castle. We cannot risk setting one off."

"But it's dark, Fleur. We'll break our necks."

Fleur said something in French that Harry strongly suspected meant that he was a toad-faced worrywart, and marched off down the stairs. Hesitating slightly, Draco and Harry followed. Sure enough after they had made three turns round the stairway they found a torch burning in a bracket high up on the wall. Fleur hoisted it down, and they went down the stairs in a line: Fleur first, then Draco, then Harry, the torch casting their eerily elongated shadows against the stone walls.

The staircase set Harry's teeth on edge. There were of course no handrails, and the rough stone was made for tripping on. He was fairly sure that at any moment he'd catch his foot and go careening headfirst into Draco. They were just making their tenth and he hoped final turn around the stairs when Harry heard Fleur give a little gasping scream. He craned his neck but couldn't see over Draco's head; Draco exclaimed suddenly, "Fleur, back up!"

She backed up quickly just as Harry came down the stairs and saw what had startled her.

They had reached the foot of the stairwell, which ended in a large oak door covered in intricate carvings of leaves, flowers, and twining vines. In the center of the door was a carved face: beaky-nosed and saturnine, with an upturned, narrow mouth. The eyes of the carving were alive, they darted from side to side, alight with



sardonic amusement.

Draco took a step down the stairs. "Ahem," he said. The door looked at him. "Do you talk?"

The door made a faint creaking sound. It sounded a little like rusty hinges, and a little like "Maybe."

"So you speak English?"

"Yes," said the door, looking irritable. "Now what do you want?"

"I want you to let us out," said Draco, turning back to look at Fleur, who nodded.

"Are you sure you want to go out there?" the door asked, with soft malice. "It's not very pleasant out there. Much safer in here."

"We're sure," said Harry, who had reached the foot of the stairs now.

"You do know what you're getting yourselves into -" began the door, and then Draco moved, intentionally or not Harry couldn't tell, so that the torchlight fell on the sword buckled at his waist. The door almost seemed to shrink back. "I did not know it was *you*," it said to Draco, and swung wide.

Draco's face had gone blank with surprise, but Harry didn't pay much attention. Through the open door, he could see a strip of starry night sky and a narrow expanse of grass -*outside*, he thought, *finally*. He stepped through the door, and Draco and Fleur followed.



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*Bang.*

Snape heard the door shut behind him and felt a savage satisfaction. As the door had swung shut, he'd seen something change in Sirius' face, shock moving into incredulity into despair. He had been so sure that Snape would help him with whatever his sordid little problem was. Because Sirius had always one of those to whom everything came easily without struggle or hardship; the sort of

person who others fell all over themselves to help. The sort of person to whom the world had been given, no questions asked.

But of course that wasn't entirely true.

Not really focusing on where he was going, Snape walked into his kitchen and stared blindly at the opposite wall.

*Azkaban.*

That had stopped Sirius laughing, had shut up his laughter forever. Sometimes Snape dreamed about Sirius in Azkaban, his laughter shattered forever into screams like bright shards of glass. And there was some pleasure in that imagining, but also a gnawing sort of darkness. It was strange - of all of them he would have said he hated James the most, hated James for what he was rather than what he did, because while Sirius liked to torment Snape, liked to hide his books and distract him during exams by humming rude songs, James just...ignored him. Looked at him as if he were less than nothing, certainly not anyone who mattered.

And then James had saved his life, and that had been worse. He remembered James dragging him back from the Shrieking Shack, throwing him on the ground, cursing Sirius under his breath, and Snape had thanked him, and it wasn't like him to thank people but he'd still been shaking with fear and reaction, so he had thanked James for saving his life even though they weren't friends, and James had looked at him out of cool gray eyes and said,

"I would have done the same thing for anyone."

And he had hated James in that moment more than he had ever hated anyone in the world or would ever hate anyone again. But James was dead; there was no point hating James any more. James was dead, and Lupin was pitiable; there was only Sirius to hate. Sirius, who had never been looked at in a way that told him he just didn't matter; Sirius, who James had loved in a way that Snape couldn't even imagine being loved. Not by a friend; not like that.

The Dark Mark on his left arm was burning as it sometimes did

when he was agitated, and his hands were shaking. He sat down at the kitchen table and switched on the radio. The sharp sounds of the WWN announcer filled the room:

*Further news has come from the Ministry regarding the disappearance of Harry Potter. Apparently, there is another boy missing with him, Draco Malfoy, son of the late Lucius Malfoy of the prominent wizarding family. Both boys have now been missing for a day, and the Ministry urges anyone with information regarding either of the boys to come forward as soon as possible. Meanwhile the wizarding world faces the awful possibility, "Have we lost the Boy Who Lived?" In other news --*

Snape got to his feet, switching the radio off as he did so, and almost before he knew what he was doing he had turned and walked out of the kitchen, had raced down the corridor to the front door and thrown it open, letting in the cold night air.

And there was Sirius, still standing in front of the door, head bowed, less like someone who was waiting than like someone who had nowhere else to go. His head whipped up as Snape opened the door, his eyes lighting with surprise and anger and - hope.

Snape clutched the knob of the door hard in his hand and snarled, "All right, Black. Tell me why you´re here in ten words exactly, or I´ll activate the Repulsus Charm that´s on this porch and it´ll hurl you halfway to Hogsmeade."

Sirius looked as if he were counting to ten and finding it insufficient. "Because I need your help," he ground out, through gritted teeth.

"That´s five words."

"Because I need your help, you very smug total bastard," he snapped, losing his temper. "You want me to beg? Is that what you want?"

"I know you´d rather die than beg me for anything," said Snape.

"I would," Sirius agreed. "But I´m not the one who´s going to die."

There was a short silence. Then Snape stepped out onto the porch, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Talk," he said.

In several short sentences, Sirius told Snape about Lupin, and what had happened to Harry and Draco. "If I can help Remus," he finished, "then he can tell us more about Slytherin - he´s been being Called to a location, he must know where it is. Don´t look skeptical - I looked it up - no one´s ever been brought back from being Called before. It could work. It might be my only chance to get to Harry before it´s too late. And I can tell by your expression that you don´t believe me," Sirius´ voice climbed several degrees in pitch, "and I´m telling you, Snape, that if you send me away from here without even hearing me out, I swear to you I will hunt you down and I will make sure that you spend the rest of your life sucking all your meals through a straw -"

"That won´t be necessary," said Snape.

Sirius paused, and blinked. "What?"

"I was wrong about you once," Snape said, taking a secret and surprisingly satisfying pleasure in the dumbfounded expression on Sirius´ face. "I´m not wrong often." He swung the door behind him wide. "I´m not planning on being wrong again."

Sirius looked from Snape, to the door, then back at Snape, as if he couldn´t quite grasp what was happening. Then, with a sharp twitch of his shoulders as if he were shaking off some dark shadow that clung to him, he walked over the threshold and into Snape´s house.

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Harry felt a keen shock of disappointment as soon as they stepped through the door. They were outside the castle in a sense, but not really outside. He found himself in a space between two very tall walls that rose up and up, making a corridor that ran from where they stood to an open door in the far wall at the opposite end. It was thickly overgrown with long, prickly grass. He craned his neck back

and looked up and around - the castle seemed bigger than he remembered, and much less tumbledown - the battlements were hugely forbidding in the darkness, and there were dark shapes ranged along them.

*Guards*, he thought, and Draco and Fleur followed his gaze upward, and nodded. Fleur's face was pale with fear in the moonlight. "We must be very careful of *those*," she whispered. "Those are shapechangers. They are Slytherin's creatures. Each possesses several shapes, and one must dispatch them in each shape before they can be killed." Then she pointed across the narrow walkway towards the door in the far wall. "We are going there," she whispered. She looked at Harry. "You go first."

They went forward in a line: Harry, Fleur, and then Draco. The grass tugged at their clothes. It was prickly, limp, and strangely clingy. Harry shuddered, shook his head, looked up - and nearly yelled out loud.

Three dementors were looming over him, their black cloaks turned gunmetal gray by the moonlight, their scabbed, rotting hands outstretched. His yell choked itself off in a gasp and he scrabbled backwards on his hands, his heart slamming against his ribcage, his mouth going dry. He glanced around wildly for Fleur and Draco, but saw them nowhere.

The dementors were advancing slowly towards him. Harry scrambled up to his knees, thinking desperately - *happy memory, happy memory*. He cast his mind back to the night before, lying on the couch in the Burrow with his head in Hermione's lap, her hair falling down around them. Listening to her quiet breathing. He shut his eyes. *Hermione* - and the tight knot of cold around his ribcage eased a little bit - but then he thought of her as he had last been with her, in the Weasleys' kitchen, her small hand in his, freezing cold with her terror, and a black wave of fear for her swept up and over him like a dizzying tide and -

Hands came down heavily on his shoulders, pulling him roughly backward.

*The kiss, he thought, they're going to perform the kiss -*

*Kiss you? I hardly know you,* came Draco's amused voice, cutting through the cold fog in his brain like a sharp knife severing a skein of wool. Harry blinked his eyes open, and saw Draco standing over him.

*Get up,* Draco told him, sounding less amused this time, and Harry got to his feet. His hands were still shaking but the cold fog seemed to have lessened. *Come on,* and Draco grabbed him by the shoulder and propelled him forward. Harry took two steps, and the grass twined itself up around his legs and oozed against his skin. He yelled. Draco's grip on his shoulder tightened. *Think about something else,* he told Harry urgently, *and keep moving forward,* and he dragged Harry, hard, by the shoulder, towards the far wall, the grass clinging limply to them both.

*What's going on?* Harry demanded, panting.

*Nightmare Grass,* Draco replied shortly. *Makes you see whatever you're most afraid of. Trick is to walk right through it and ignore the pain; it goes away after a little bit. The slower you go, the more nightmares you get.*

*And it doesn't bother you?* Harry demanded incredulously, thinking that this seemed unfair.

*That potion Snape gave me helps. Also, I knew what it was. That helps too.*

*Don't tell me. Your dad used to grow it back at the Mansion.*

*Got it in one,* Draco replied shortly.

*Didn't your father ever consider putting in maybe a tennis court or a nice gazebo instead?*

*Don't knock it - my Dark Arts background just saved your hide, Potter. But don't worry, I'll be sure to call in your expertise as soon as we have to deal with, say, a small box of puppies.*

Harry was about to retort when he caught sight of Fleur, lying in the grass on her back. She seemed to be involved in a battle with her own hair, shrieking and flailing with her arms at nothing. Draco knelt down next to her and touched her shoulder gently. She yelped and hit out at him, screaming in French.

Draco caught one of her arms and Harry seized the other. It wasn't easy holding on to her - she was kicking and screaming and seemed inclined to bite as well. They dragged her quickly from the grass to the dirt at the foot of one of the walls. She went instantly quiet, and pulled away from them, gasping and wide-eyed. She stared up at Draco, who was closest to her. "You're all right?" she said, in a quavering voice. "You're not dead?"

Draco blinked. "No."

Fleur took a shuddering breath. "What was that?"

"Never mind," said Harry, and craned his neck back, pointing up to the dark shapes on the silvery battlements. They were no longer still, but moving slowly, purposefully, torches raised... the guards.

*I think they heard us yelling*, he thought.

*You mean they heard you yelling.* Draco glanced up, then held out a hand to Fleur and helped her up. *You all right?*

She nodded.

"Then run," he said, and broke into a flat-out run, Fleur and Harry close at his heels. They flew through the Nightmare Grass, reached the far tower, and hurtled through the door, slamming it hard behind them.

They found themselves in a dimly lit entryway - there was only one window, and it was nearly overgrown with ivy. A long corridor snaked away into darkness to their right. Still shaky from exertion and adrenaline, Harry started off down it at a run, the others behind him. Or so he thought. Having gone no more than a hundred paces,



he came up short at a tall wooden door. He grabbed the handle and tugged; it was locked.

"Fleur, is this the way -" he began, turning. And blinked. Draco was standing behind him, looking curious, but there was no sign of Fleur. "Malfoy? Where's Fleur?"

Surprised, Draco turned. "I thought she was behind me."

Harry lowered his hand from the door. "We'd better go back."

Draco opened his mouth to say something - and a cry echoed through the corridor, originating back where they had come from. It was a sharp, distressed cry, and the voice was obviously Fleur's.

Both boys bolted back down the corridor. They burst out into the entryway, and stopped dead.

Fleur, holding a thin-bladed knife, was backed against a wall by one of the guards: a tall man in a heavy cloak, a short sword in his hand, his back to them. His shadow, in the pulsing torchlight, clawed at the ceiling. Fleur's eyes flew wide when she saw her companions, and she gave a little cry of relief.

A little cry, but it was enough. The guard spun around, raising his sword, and advanced on Draco and Harry.

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Hermione's stomach dropped down into her shoes. "*Ron?*" she shouted, running forward and nearly elbowing Ginny aside. She could hear Charlie right behind her as they approached the spot where Ron had disappeared. "Ron! Where are you?"

A very irritable voice spoke out of the darkness. "Down here."

Beside her, Charlie raised his wand, flooding the corridor with light. The uneven walls were suddenly thrown into sharp relief, the muddy floor that stretched in front of them...and ended, rather suddenly, in a gaping, jagged-edged hole. Hermione raced to the

edge of the hole and peered down.

Ron's pale, annoyed face looked up at her. He seemed completely unharmed. Hermione sagged in relief. "Ron, are you all right?"

An expression of distaste crossed his face. "Mud," he said succinctly. "And it's dark." He glanced around him, squinting. "Could somebody toss me down a wand? I think I dropped mine into the mud and I'd like to find it."

Hermione tossed her wand down to Ron, who caught it.

"*Lumos*," he said.

Bright light burst from the wand, illuminating the space around Ron. Hermione watched as his expression changed to one of gratified amazement. Instead of the disgruntled look of someone who had fallen off his broomstick in the middle of an important game, Ron now looked like someone who had fallen off his broomstick in the middle of an important game, only to land in a hot tub full of veelas.

"You have *got* to come down here," he exclaimed.

Doubtful, Hermione peered over the lip of the hole. Before she could move to do anything, though, Charlie had leaped down beside Ron in the pit, landing on his feet as lightly as a cat. Then he turned around and held his arms up to Hermione. "Your turn. I'll catch you."

Taking a deep breath, she jumped. Charlie caught her easily and lowered her gently to the ground. She stifled a smile - the rough feeling of the dragonhide against her skin made her think of Draco.

She heard the sound as Ginny jumped down after her, but didn't turn - she was too busy staring around her. The expression on Ron's face suddenly made sense.

It looked as if they were in some sort of underground vault. The floor was covered in mud, but stone shelves ranged along the walls

held overflowing piles of valuable-looking objects - jewels, gold coins, bolts of tapestry, silver plates, cups and bowls. To be sure, much of it was ruined with age - the cloth rotted through, the silver tarnished - but the majority of it was surprisingly intact.

Hermione looked over at Ron, who was still staring around himself in shock. She could read the look on his face as clearly as if she were reading a book: *All this was down here all these years, and we never knew.*

A sudden burst of sympathy for him propelled her to his side. "Ron..."

But he was examining something in his hand. "Look at this." He held out a gold coin to her; she took it without much interest--then stared. The face stamped on the coin was ... familiar. "That looks like Harry," she said blankly.

"It's Godric Gryffindor," said Ron. "It's a Gryffindor Galleon. Really old. They're worth loads." He looked at it a bit wistfully. "I wish we could show it to Harry - he'd think it was hilarious, him on a coin."

"He'll get to see it," said Hermione firmly. She slipped it into Ron's breast pocket, and patted the pocket closed. A gleam at the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she turned and picked up a tiny round mirror, edged with silver. It reminded her strongly of the Mirror of Erised, with a very slight difference -

"I think we probably shouldn't take anything from here," said Charlie from behind them. Hermione turned and looked at him. He was wearing an expression of mingled amazement and wariness. He pushed a stray lock of dark red hair back from his eyes, and sighed. "I know it's tempting, but you never know what kind of spells - Ginny, what are you doing?"

Hermione and Ron both turned, and saw Ginny. She was standing in a corner of the room, staring quite fixedly at the wall. Exchanging looks, Hermione and Ron hurried over to her. "Gin, what is it?"

Ginny pointed. She was looking at a wall of even, gray stone bricks -

or so it looked from a distance. Up close, it was possible to see that one of the bricks stood out. It was a pale silver color, metallic. All around it the wall was thick with dust, but it was clean, untarnished. Etched across the side of it was a sentence of what looked like poetry in thin, engraved letters:

*To be gold is to be good to be stone is to be nothing to be glass is to be fragile to be cold is to be cruel.*

Ron made a little groaning sound. "Another riddle?"

"It looks like it," said Charlie, ever the cautious voice of reason. "Anyone want to venture a guess?"

I know the answer, Hermione thought to herself. But instead of speaking, she looked at Ginny.

Ginny hesitated. She took a step forward. Then she raised her hand, and with her right index finger drew, in the dust that covered the wall beneath the silver brick like a thick powdering of flour, the shape of a heart.

Hermione thought she heard a faint chiming noise, as of distant music - and the brick slid out of the wall and toppled into Ginny's outstretched hands.

From which it was immediately removed by Charlie, bent on examining it. It turned out not to be a brick at all but a sealed silver casket, rectangular in shape. The top was engraved with a raised emblem: a magical creature with a lion's body, the head of a man, and a scorpion's tail. The tail was curved into the shape of a sideways 8. *Infinity*. Under its feet stretched a line of words in Latin.

"What do those mean?" inquired Ron, staring suspiciously at the box.

"I think it translates roughly as "My hovercraft is full of eels," said Charlie, looking wise.

"It does not," snapped Hermione, taking the box from Charlie's

hands. "It means 'This belongs to time and the dark places.'  
There's also another word here, which looks, well, a bit like the  
word for 'death' ...but it might not be."

"Death?" said Ron. "Er...that sounds like the sort of translation one  
ought to be sure about before..."

"*Accio*," interrupted Ginny, firmly. The box soared out of  
Hermione's hands and landed in Ginny's grasp. She glanced up, saw  
them all staring at her in astonishment, and smiled serenely. "This is  
mine," she said, with quiet conviction, and touched her hand to the  
side. The box emitted a single sharp musical note, and opened like a  
flower, the lid sliding back. Bright light shone from its interior,  
illuminating Ginny's pale face as she reached into it and drew out  
something that dangled and shimmered on the end of a finely  
wrought gold chain...something shaped like an hourglass, something  
ornately wrought and carved...

"Oh," breathed Hermione, looking from the glittering pendant to  
Ginny's startled face. "It's a Time-Turner."



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As the guard came towards them, Harry saw with shock that it wasn't human, not a werewolf either, but something else entirely - it had a wrinkled, piglike face with long tusks that protruded from

either side of its mouth. It moved towards them swiftly, but before Harry had time to do more than step back, Draco had raised his sword and put the blade through its face. It made a noise like a bucketful of water being poured into a patch of mud, staggered back and collapsed to the ground, blood pouring from its head.

Draco looked ill. Harry, who had drawn his own sword, took a shaky breath and clapped him on the arm. "Well done, Malfoy."

"No!" cried Fleur, hurling herself off the wall she had been pressed against, "they are shape-changers, I told you--"

She was right. As Draco and Harry gazed in horror, the dead-looking guard on the floor wavered and blurred and became a squat, scaly creature that leaped to its feet and charged at Draco again. Looking startled, he dispatched it for the second time, and it became a many-limbed snaky thing. This time Draco chopped off its head, using another fencing move that Harry would have recognized, except by this point Harry had stopped watching, because a second guard had come into the room and leaped straight for him.

He swung the sword at it and managed to slice open its throat. This did very little good, as it immediately turned into a tall man carrying a longsword, and charged at him. Harry stopped thinking and let the sword in his hand do its work - he had already discovered that if he cleared his mind, it seemed to come to life in his hand, or, more likely, that the undercurrent of knowledge from Draco was able to work its way up and direct his arm. But every time he tried to analyze what he was doing, he lost his footing or missed a stroke, so he stopped trying to plan and let his instincts take over, catching at the unfamiliar names of the motions he was making as they fled under the surface of his mind: *bind, double bind, circle parry, riposte*.

He quickly slaughtered the longsword man-shape, which turned into a wolf, which turned into a large, fox-like creature, which turned into a petite beautiful woman in a leather breastplate. This last incarnation startled Harry so much that he staggered back and nearly lost his footing. He had barely a chance to blink when something silver whipped over his head and embedded itself in the

shape-changer's chest. It was Fleur's knife.

The creature screamed, blurred, and folded like a rag doll; this time, when it crumpled to the ground, it bled inky green blood and lay still.

Heart pounding, Harry glanced at Fleur, who was looking down at the dead guard with a dazed expression. "Thanks," he said, and glanced past her to Draco, who was standing over the dead body of the first guard, white-faced, and looking just as shaken as Harry felt.

Feeling Harry's gaze on him, he looked up and quickly rearranged his features a look of bland amusement. "So," he said. "Did anything about that strike anyone else as ... unusual?"

He grinned the smug grin that Harry always wanted to hit.

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Harry wearily.

Fleur meanwhile was bending down to retrieve her knife from the guard's chest. "More of them will be coming," she said, straightening up and turning -- and then quite unexpectedly, she went white and pitched forward onto her hands and knees.

"*Fleur--*" Draco covered the distance of the room in a few strides and knelt down next to her. "What is it?"

In response, she clutched at his arm. Normally Harry would have thought this was some sort of ploy, but she really did look distressed - she was paper-white and gasping, her other hand pressed to her chest. Slowly her breathing slowed and she glanced up, her forehead beaded with sweat - and Harry saw the fear in her eyes.

Draco touched her shoulder. "You all right?"

She nodded, almost speechless. "Yes - just give me a moment."

Draco glanced up at Harry. *Potter - go and see if you can get that door open. Use magic if you need to. We have to get out of here as*



*soon as possible.*

Harry nodded and headed off down the hall, still ruminating on the odd look of fear in Fleur's eyes. Well, they were in a very dangerous situation, it made sense to be afraid, but still... something about it troubled him.

What did she know that they didn't?

\*\*\*

Sirius stood in Snape's workroom, strange smells tickling his nose. They weren't bad smells, in fact he thought of it as the scent of magic at work: burning pitch, charred stone, mysterious herbs. Thick gray smoke rose from the cauldron over which Snape stood, twining up towards the high-raftered ceiling and smelling strangely of mint and cabbage. Fires burned along the table, crowned with fat-bellied cauldrons, glowing blood-red with heat. That, combined with the warmth of the rising smoke, was making Sirius sweat through his clothes.

Snape, by contrast, was looking almost cold, hunched into his robes and grumbling over his cauldron. "Adjustments will have to be made," he muttered.

"Adjustments?"

Snape glanced up and nodded. "The potion as I brew it is for administration to human beings. One of the key ingredients is wolfsbane. Obviously, some replacement for wolfsbane will have to be found in this case, as I doubt it would agree with your friend Lupin."

"Quite," said Sirius, feeling lost. Potions had never been one of his favorite subjects. He much preferred Transfiguration, at which he had excelled. He thought fondly back to one spring afternoon when he had turned Snape's cauldron into a fat orange hamster which had bitten Snape on the toe. *No*, he told himself, *mustn't think about that...*

"But then you always were far more interested in Transfiguration," said Snape, his beady black eyes glancing over Sirius, who jumped.

"Erm," said Sirius. "yes, yes I was," and he began prowling up and down the room, trying to look preoccupied. It wasn't hard: there were diversions enough in Snape's workroom to preoccupy anyone. Cauldrons of all sizes, jars of dragon's blood too hot to touch, flasks of weeping willow tears, caskets of powdered mandrake, silver jars of powdered unicorn horn. Absently, Sirius paused to examine the books stacked haphazardly on a table. One caught his eye in particular: a heavy burgundy volume with a gold-stamped spine that read *Demons, Demons, Demons*. He picked it up and flicked it open. *Everything You Wanted to Know About Hell's Denizens, and Several Things You Didn't*, read the flyleaf.

"What are you looking at, Black?" demanded Snape.

Sirius brandished the book in the air. "*Demons, Demons, Demons* - what a title."

"It's a book about demons. What would you call it?"

"*The Book of Demons?*" Sirius suggested, flicking idly through the pages.

"A name rife with single entendre."

"It was just a suggestion -" Sirius broke off, staring down at a page of the book, his eyes wide. He raised his head. "Hey - can I borrow this book?"

"You want to borrow my book?"

"Is there an echo in here?" Sirius said, then shut his mouth hurriedly. Something about Snape reduced him to the approximate age of thirteen, try as he might to fight it. He just couldn't be in the same room with the man without having fantasies about hanging him upside-down by his ankles over the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall with the words "Kiss Me: I'm Irish" magically emblazoned on his shorts.

Not that Sirius had ever done such a thing.

Certainly not.

"I mean, yes, I´d like to borrow it..."

Snape slammed the beaker he was holding down onto the table with force. "You having a problem with demons?"

"You might say that."

"Typical," said Snape shortly, without raising his head. "Take the book if you want it."

"Thanks," said Sirius. He realized that this was the first time in his life he had ever thanked Snape for anything. It seemed momentous, but Snape apparently hadn´t even noticed. He was leaning back, his gaze fixed on the smoking cauldron before him, a look of satisfaction on his face. "It´s done," he announced.

Tucking the book under his arm, Sirius strode over to the cauldron. The liquid in it had stopped bubbling, and had settled down into a thick, smooth silvery-gray material, somewhat reflective, like mercury, or moonlight. It was almost pretty. Sirius reached out a hand --

"Don´t touch it," said Snape harshly.

Sirius took his hand back, nettled. "Well, pardon me for living."

Snape looked up at him from under beetling dark brows, his black eyes flat. "No one gets pardoned for living," he said. "Not even you."

To that, Sirius found he had nothing to say. He watched Snape as the Potions master filled a glass, copper-bound flask with a measure of the pale-gray liquid from the cauldron. He held it out to Sirius, who reached to take it. As he did, the firelight struck a spark off the red stone in his bracelet.

"Vivicus charm?" asked Snape, eyebrows high.

"Harry," said Sirius shortly, taking the flask and stashing it in the inside pocket of his robe.

"It's good that you have that," said Snape shortly.

*Good for me?* Sirius wondered. *Or good for Harry?*

He looked at Snape. Snape looked back at him. Sirius realized that they were done. He felt slightly lost. *Now what?*

"Look," he began, haltingly, "do you want to come with me?"

Snape blinked at him. "What?"

"I thought," said Sirius, wondering if he might be going mad, "that you might like to see the effects of your potion. To know - that it worked. That's all."

"I made it. It will work," said the Potions teacher coolly.

"Oh." Sirius blinked. "Well, in that case, I should tha--"

"Don't thank me," interrupted Snape. "The image of you trying to force that potion down the throat of a half-crazed werewolf is really all the thanks I need."

Sirius looked down at the potion, and then back at Snape, who wasn't exactly smiling, but had a smug sort of look around his eyes. "This potion," he said, "it isn't going to make Lupin sprout bat ears or boils or any other side effects like--"

"Oh, bugger off, Black," interrupted Snape in exasperation, and Sirius, realizing that he was fighting a losing battle, Disapparated, flask and book in hand.

\*\*\*

Ron, Ginny and Hermione were sitting in the living room of the

Burrow. They were waiting for Charlie to come back from the kitchen, where he was having one of the Aurors who had been guarding the house hex-test the Turner for malicious spells.

Ginny was waiting impatiently for Charlie, Hermione was reading a copy of *From Basilisks to Werewolves: Anglin's Magical Bestiary*, and Ron was busy examining Fred and George's magazine collection, which had turned up under a paving stone in the cellar.

Hermione shook her head at him. "I cannot believe you are reading those."

Ron grinned. "These are quality publications."

"Ron, nothing you have to read sideways is a quality publication."

"You know, these magazine are really old," he observed, conversationally. "In fact, I swear that's Professor McGonagall," he added, holding the magazine up towards Hermione, who glanced at the indicated page without a great deal of interest.

"It does kind of look like her," Hermione agreed. "Who knew she owned a kimono, or was so strangely fond of marmalade?"

"Or was ever blonde?" put in Ginny, leaning over.

Ron hastily yanked the magazine away. "Ginny! You're not allowed to look at that!"

"Why not?"

"Because you're a girl - and you're too young."

"Hermione's a girl."

"Yeah, but Hermione's been hanging around with me and Harry for years. She's thoroughly corrupted already."

"Ron, I've got six older brothers. I'm thoroughly corrupted as well."

Hermione giggled. "Ginny, don't say that, you'll give Ron an aneurysm."

Ron grinned at her. Instead of making her want to grin back, though, she felt a wave of sadness. Ron smiling, his dark blue eyes narrowed with amusement - it hurt a little, looking at him, because while she loved having Ron around, even just the sound of his voice threw into painful relief the fact that Harry wasn't there. So much of her life now it had always been both of them, Ron and Harry, Harry and Ron, flanking her, her constant companions. When she wanted to find Harry in the Great Hall, she would automatically look for Ron, his height and flame-colored hair making him stand out, and there would be Harry next to him. Looking at Ron brought vivid pictures of Harry to her mind: Harry and Ron tearing into their presents Christmas morning, bits of wrapping paper flying around them; Harry and Ron both trying to sneak looks at her notes in the library. She remembered telling them both that someone had written OWL RON WEASLEY FOR A GOOD TIME on the girls' bathroom wall in foot-high letters, and Harry laughing so hard that Ron had to hold him up. It was as impossible to separate them in any permanent way in her mind as it would be to separate Harry from his scar, or Draco from his acid sense of humor.

Ron waved a hand in front of her face and she came back to reality with a start. She tried to smile at him, but could feel her mouth being uncooperative. Ron looked curious. "What's up, Herm? Thinking about your dreams again?"

"So what if I am? Dreams have meaning," said Hermione firmly.

"Tell me about it," agreed Ginny from the other side of the table. "The other night I dreamt that Draco and I..." she caught Ron's look and shrank back.

Ron used his warning voice. "*Ginny*. I do not want to know."

"Here it is," announced Hermione, interrupting. They both look at her blankly, and she smiled, turning the book around so Ginny could see the picture she was looking at. "The engraving on the lid of the box - it's a mantichore." She read out loud: "the fearsome

manticore has the body of a lion, the face of a man, and the stinging tail of a scorpion. Its huge jaws, as well, are unique: They hold two rows of razor-sharp teeth, upper and lower, that interlock like the teeth of a comb when the beast closes its mouth. The teeth can slash nearly to ribbons, and the manticore is said to relish feasting on humans. The most dangerous aspect however is its tail. There is no cure for the poison of the manticore, and no help for the victim who is but scratched by its deadly sting." Hermione shut the book and looked over at Ron, who was looking impressed. "See, there are worse things than spiders out there."

Ginny looked surprised. "Why would that be on the lid of my box?" she demanded. "Do you think that means there's something bad in there?"

"Apparently not," said Charlie, coming back into the kitchen holding the Time-Turner. "Clean bill of health, I'm told," he added, although he continued looking at it with suspicion.

Ginny held out a hand, her eyes lighting up. "Let me have it, then."

"No," said Charlie firmly. "Not until I've talked to Mum and Dad."

"But there aren't any hexes on it!" Ginny's voice came out on a squeak.

"I know," said Charlie, looking apologetic but firm. "Gin, I just can't. It might not be safe. After what happened with that diary, if I gave you this without asking them, they would -"

"*Charlie!*" Ginny looked aghast. She spun around, looked at Hermione, who was anxiously fingering the Lycanthe around her neck. "Hermione, tell him--"

"Ginny," said Hermione firmly. "He's right."

Ginny's dark eyes flew wide, and without another word, she leaped from the table, and fled upstairs. Hermione heard her bedroom door bang shut.

Charlie bit his lip, looking at Ron and Hermione. "You understand, I just can't -" he began, then sighed, turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

There was a short silence. Hermione pushed her chair back from the table. "I think I want to go be by myself for a while," she said, biting her lip.

Ron looked up at her, his mouth drawn down thoughtfully. "Do you really think the Turner might be dangerous?"

She didn't meet his eyes. "Are you willing to let Ginny risk it?"

Ron looked startled. "When you put it like *that*...no."

Hermione passed the back of her hand across her forehead. "I'm tired. I'm going to go lie down."

She could feel his anxious gaze on her as she left the room, but she didn't turn around.

\*\*\*

Draco sat propped against the wall in the entryway, Fleur beside him, leaning against his arm. He had shoved the dead bodies of the guards into a corner, and was trying not to look towards them. Although he had never killed a person before, it wasn't true that he had never killed anything - he had been hunting with his father many times, and had killed all sorts of animals, both magical and otherwise. But he had never really enjoyed it, never gotten the taste for it that his father had. He didn't like killing things. He was good at it. But he didn't like it.

Perhaps because of the dimness and the knowledge of death around him, he was suddenly visited with an all-to-vivid recollection of the land of the dead; the light too dim to show any color, the shifting shapes, the anxious ghostly voices calling out of the mist. The awfulness of the place struck him more forcibly now than when he was in it, and he felt again a lingering guilt - why should Harry's parents, who had never harmed a soul, be doomed to something



worse than Hell, while he, through no effort and no merit of his own, came back and walked among the living?

Fleur interrupted his ruminations by rolling her head distractedly against his shoulder. He glanced down at her. Her hair shone like the edge of a silver coin in the half-light, and some of the color had come back into her face. She looked very pretty, although the fact that her hair color was so similar to his own always gave him pause. It was nice enough hair, and looked terrific on him of course, but he preferred darker hair really.

"Draco," said Fleur softly.

"Yes?"

"I´m feeling better now."

He smiled to himself in the darkness. "Good. Then you can release your death-grip on my leg. I´m losing feeling in my knee."

"Oh, is that your leg?"

"Ah, this is where we get into all the fun 'are you happy to see me or is that a broomstick in your pocket?' banter. Go ahead. Don´t mind me if I just sit here."

"You are no fun anymore," she complained.

"Was I ever fun? Remind me of one second when I was fun, because I think I might have missed it."

"Oh come, you are always fun," she murmured, sliding into his lap; as she reached up her arms, a strand of her silver hair tickled his cheek - and a shooting pain drove through his side.

"Ow," he yelped, pulling away from her.

Fleur dropped her arms, looking surprised. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

"Yeah, that thing got me in the side with its knife before I killed it. It's not too bad though."

"Is it bleeding? Did you tell 'Arry?"

"Yes on the bleeding, and no on the telling Harry. And don't you tell him, either. He'll just whinge, and we're in a hurry."

Fleur set her round mouth into a firm disapproving line. "Well, let me see it, then."

With a resigned sigh Draco leaned back against the wall, pulling his jacket aside and his shirt up to reveal the cut that slashed across his side, just under his ribs. It was shallow, but long, and still bleeding slightly. Fortunately the black shirt he wore had soaked up most of the blood, but it still looked unpleasant.

"Draco!" Fleur's eyes were wide. "You 'ave to let me fix it."

"You said no magic."

"That does not mean you 'ave to sit here and bleed." With surprising alacrity, she reached down and began tearing at the hem of her robe with her small knife. Within a few moment she had several good-length swathes of fabric. "Lean forward," she told him, and, kneeling with her knees on either side of his legs, began to wind the makeshift bandages around his midsection. She tied the first one tightly at his side, wound another one over it, tied that one as well, and sat back to examine her handiwork. "'Ow do you feel now?" she demanded.

"Like a giftwrapped birthday present."

She gave him a sharp look. He had rather thought that once she was done with the bandages, she might get off his lap. But she didn't seem inclined to do so. *Hmm.*

"I meant thank you," he corrected himself, pulling his shirt down.

"I suppose you did." She put down the knife she had been holding,

but didn't take her other hand off his side. "I think you do appreciate what other people do for you, in your own unappreciative way."

"You make it sound like people are constantly doing things for me," he said, nettled.

"Aren't they?" She looked up at him with wide eyes. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Don't know what?"

She reached out and put a hand under his chin, tilting up his face; no one had done that to him since he had been a little boy. She gazed down at him, the torchlight reflecting like cloud light off her porcelain skin. He was beginning to feel extremely dizzy and lightheaded, probably from the heavy sweet fragrance that clung to her hair and hands. Or, possibly, it was the blood loss. He rather hoped it was the blood loss.

She leaned forward, and the sweet scent around her hair intensified. Her arms slid around his neck, sending a sharp bolt of heat up his spine. She tilted her head down and kissed him lightly on the mouth before moving to plant a row of butterfly kisses along the side of his neck.

He knew it wasn't on to snog one girl and think about another, but he couldn't help thinking of Hermione, and the urgency of kissing her in the wardrobe, that feeling that if he didn't kiss her at that exact moment, he might die. And kissing Ginny, which was like suddenly being in sunlight after a long time of being closed up in the dark. In contrast, Fleur was kissing him as if she were trying to find out something about him. Although what exactly she could find out about him by sticking her tongue in his ear was unclear.

He tightened his grip on her arms, and with not a little reluctance, pushed her away. "Fleur," he said warningly. "Boom. Remember?"

She smiled a secretive sort of smile. He stared at her. Her cheeks were flushed, but she was looking at him as dispassionately as if he

were something in a petri dish; it was unnerving.

"You seem....different than you did before," she announced.

Draco was taken aback. "Different how? Besides taller and better-looking, of course."

"Draco....is there someone you love?"

"Someone I love?" The question jarred him slightly, and he was beginning to feel silly sitting there with her hand under his shirt, although having her gaze up at him with huge, admiring eyes was not entirely terrible. "Well, I suppose so."

"Who?"

"Me," he said firmly.

"I mean someone you would die to protect. Someone you couldn't live without."

"*Other* than me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Not the way you're thinking of it," Draco said carefully, "no."

"Well," said Fleur. "Maybe there should be."

"Ahem." A voice spoke out of the shadows. Draco turned his head and saw that Harry had returned, and was looking at them with his eyebrows raised. Draco grinned to himself, realizing how it must look, Fleur plastered against him, her hands up under his shirt. Not that it was any of Harry's business, but the look on his face, mingled amusement and exasperation, was pretty funny. "Ahem," Harry said again. "Sorry to interrupt the gropefest, people, but I got the door open."

"Really?" Draco drawled, not moving. Fleur didn't move either.

"Yes well let's not all run up and thank me or anything," snapped Harry, looking miffed.

"Thanks," said Draco. "Now go away and come back in ten minutes."

Harry looked disgusted. "Okay, remember when you were Draco Malfoy, back before you were Don Juan? And you said, and I quote 'we have to get out of here as quickly as possible'? That was you, wasn't it?"

"Calm down Potter, I'm just kidding," grinned Draco, detaching himself from Fleur and standing up. Fleur dropped her hands, a bit reluctantly. She bent to retrieve her knife and moved off gracefully down the corridor, and now that she had sliced off the bottom portion of her robe Draco could see a lot more of her legs, which wasn't necessarily a completely bad thing -

"Earth to Malfoy," said Harry, waving a hand in front of his face. Draco raised an eyebrow at him. "Go ahead, stare at her. Take a big steamy gawk. Right. Now, perhaps we might get going?"

"You know, she's actually ..kind of a special girl."

"Yeah," grinned Harry. "Especially her--"

Draco clapped a hand over his mouth. "That's enough out of you."

*I said especially her -*

"I 'can 'ear you!" sang out Fleur from down the corridor. "I 'can 'ear you, 'Arry Potter!"

Draco took his hand off Harry's mouth, smirking.

"Damn," said Harry.

\*\*\*

*He stood before the stained-glass window, whose illustration of his family crest threw the shadow of a scarlet lion on the stone floor at*

*his feet, and dappled the shoulders of his dark red robes with gold. He had been pacing, but now he stood still, his hands knotted together. She had rarely seen him so overwhelmed.*

*"Godric...what is it?"*

*He paused, and looked at her. "I have been to the battlefield," he said. "I did not want to tell Rowena but I have seen...terrible things."*

*"Battle is terrible, you have always said so. And when Salazar does a thing, he never does it halfway."*

*"He has raised up an army of monsters. Neither soldier nor sorcerer can stand against him." Godric paused, pushing a piece of black hair back off his forehead. "I have sent spies after him, but most never returned. Those who have tell me that all signs spell disaster." He raised his eyes to her. "Is it true that she yet does not want him dead?"*

*"She loves him."*

*Godric winced. "Still?"*

*"These things are not logical." Helga sat forward in her chair. "But it does not matter. I sincerely doubt that he can be killed. He would have to have a heart, for us to stop it beating."*

*Godric shook his head. "You know my views."*

*"There is another way. We must turn his own powers against him. Godric, you must promise me you will not go after him. Not until we are ready. No matter what he does. Promise me."*

*But Godric was looking out the window, at a sunset made more scarlet by the tinted glass. "I would not have thought it, even of him," he said. "Where has he kept so black a hatred these twenty-seven years?"*

*"Hate is only the other face of love," she heard herself say, but Godric had turned as if he wanted to hear no more of this, and held*

*out his hand to her.*

*"Come," he said. "What time we have to lose, we have lost already."*

Ginny turned over in bed, restlessly, her hands clutching the pillow. Patterns of infinity danced like lightning behind her eyelids.

\*\*\*

"I can too fight. I killed that guard."

"*Fleur* killed that guard."

"I killed it six times first!"

"But it wasn't dead when you were finished with it. Ergo, she killed it."

Harry, stomping along the corridor after Draco, sulked.

"Don't sulk. For someone with all the grace and coordination of a pregnant wildebeest, you did great."

Harry sulked more. "I killed it."

"Failure has gone to your head, Potter. You've got delusions of adequacy."

"I wish you two would shut up," said Fleur, in the dreamy sort of hopeful tone of voice of someone saying "I wish I could win a free holiday in Majorca." She shook her silvery head. "You obviously cannot stand each other. Why do you bother talking at all?"

"Girl's got a point," said Draco, hopping over a wide gap between two broken paving stones, and turning to watch Harry follow after him. The corridor they had been following was narrowing and narrowing as they went farther on; it was beginning to become claustrophobic.

"Please. You love talking to me. Who else would put up with you?"

"You only put up with me because you have absolutely no choice," said Draco, more easily than he felt. There was a stirring sense of uneasiness in his guts, and the worst part was that he wasn't sure why - he wondered, not idly, how long it had been since he'd taken the Will-strengthening Potion Snape had given him.

"Shouldn't we be out of the castle by now?" demanded Harry, glancing around as they turned a corner. The walls were incredibly dusty, as if no one had passed through these corridors in years.

"We are passing under the gardens," said Fleur, sounding superior. "It is better that way."

Harry shook his head. "Why is it better this way?"

"It is better," Fleur said, "because we will emerge in the center of the forest, which will be much safer. Harry! What a rude gesture to make at Draco behind his back. Oh, look, we are here, and -"

They had come to the end of the corridor, a dank low space that terminated in a large, iron-bound oak door with a square iron handle. Fleur took hold of it, pulled it toward her - and paused, a look of horror spreading over her face. She knelt down, running her fingers along the joins where the door met the wall. "Oh, no," she breathed.

Draco felt a prickle of anxiety race up his spine. "What?"

Fleur turned to look at them, her face a mask of misery. "Someone 'as sealed the door shut with adamantine."

"Adamantine?" Draco knelt down next to her to examine the door. She was right. He recognized the sealing around the edges of the door as the now-familiar white-blue glassy substance he was beginning to hate with a vengeance.

Fleur looked up at him, her blue eyes wide and horrified. "This is the last door," she whispered. "It leads outside - he must have sealed it closed!" She caught at his hand. "What can we do?"



"Break it down," said Harry from behind them. He was leaning back against the wall, using the side of his sleeve to rub the green bloodstains from his sword. He looked at Draco. "Break it down."

Draco turned back to Fleur. "Brace yourself," he said, grabbed her, and kissed her hard. She flailed her arms for a moment, and then relaxed into his embrace. He pricked his ears up for any kind of explosion or boom noise, but there was....nothing. He kept up the kiss for few moments longer, generally in the spirit that if a thing was worth doing it was worth doing right, and then released her. She gave a little squeak and stepped back, staring at him.

"So," said Harry, his eyebrows raised, "anybody want to venture a guess where Slytherin might be?"

Draco looked over at him. "Not really; why?"

"Because if my only other choice is to stand here and watch you two kissing, I think I'd like to go spend some quality time with him. You know, I kinda think he liked me."

'Don't whine, Potter," said Draco dispiritedly. "What I was trying to do, didn't work. We'll have to try something else." He eyed Harry speculatively for a moment.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You're not going to kiss *me*, are you?"

Draco grinned slowly. "I might."

"I really think you should," Fleur said. "He's a much more powerful Magid than I am."

"Desperate times," said Draco, and took a step towards Harry. "Shut your eyes, Potter, it'll all be over in a second."

"I am *not* going to shut my eyes," Harry began indignantly.

"So you like to kiss with your eyes open? Kinky, that," said Draco, cheerfully, and grabbed Harry by the front of the shirt.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Oh, all right then. Get it over with."

But Draco had frozen in place. A familiar tingling had begun to spread through his fingers where they touched Harry's shirt. A well-known familiar, dreaded feeling. He released Harry and stepped back abruptly. "We have to get back."

They both stared at him.

"We have to go back," he said again, more firmly this time.

"Back where?" said Harry. "You think there's another way out?"

"Back where we started, where else?" Draco snapped.

"Draco, we *can't*," said Fleur, looking desperate.

"What do you mean, we can't? You got into the castle once through here. You can get back."

"No I can't!" cried Fleur, visibly upset. "Before, I was following *that* -" and she pointed at the emerald in his sword hilt. "I put a Tracking Charm on my broomstick and left it outside this door, as well, so I could find my way back to it - but Draco, this is a maze. If we head back into it without knowing where we're going, we could wander until we die. Did you not see all those skeletons in the corridors? What did you think happened to them?"

"Well, have you got a better idea?" Draco demanded.

"I've got one," said Harry.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "You've got a plan? Forgive me if I don't leap up and down with excitement, but your record in this department is not exactly gold standard. So what is it?"

"Let's try to break down the door together - you and me - you know our power is stronger when it's combined, and it doesn't matter if we do magic now, we're so close to getting out. Besides, what other

choice do we have?"

Draco ruminated. The idea of holding hands with Harry did not exactly appeal to him at the moment, given the fact that he was increasingly positive that the Will-Strengthening Potion was wearing off. Once they got outside, Fleur could swiftly remove Harry from the vicinity via her broomstick, but at the moment, trapped together in a very small corridor with no appreciable way out - on the other hand, Harry was right, what other choice did they have?

Well. There was one other option. But he didn't want to have to take it.

Draco stuck his hand out towards Harry. "Let's do it."

Fleur watched with raised eyebrows as they locked their hands together. Draco debated asking her to link hands with them as well but dismissed the idea, since they had never tried such an experiment and he was dubious about the side effects. He felt the familiar bolt of cold as Harry's scar touched his own; then they directed their linked hands towards the door and -

"*Alohomora!*" cried Harry.

A jet of whitish light shot from their hands, struck the door - and bounced off, shooting back towards them like a bullet. Draco threw himself flat as it whipped over his head, nearly singeing his hair, and turned to watch in amazement as the bolt of light, making the whistling noise of a teakettle on the boil, erupted down the corridor, ricocheting off the walls as it went and in general making a thundering racket. He sat up slowly and looked at Harry, who was gazing off after the bolt of light, eyes wide and jaw hanging open.

"Great plan, Potter," he said. "Another world-beater. Congrats."

Harry looked at him, and, instead of telling to shut up, suddenly grinned instead. He was covered in dirt from the corridor floor, and his green eyes sparkled in his grime-streaked face. "Ha!" he said cheerfully. "You're just hacked off that it messed up your hair."

Draco was about to respond when another half-painful jolt of feeling shot up his arm, and he suddenly realized that he was holding his sword again. He didn't remember picking it up, either.

He dropped it quickly and stood up, ignoring Fleur's proffered hand. He glanced down one more time at Harry, who was trying to brush the dust off his shirt - a losing proposition. Then he glanced back at the sealed door, remembering the splintering of the adamantine box in Lupin's office, shattered by Harry's anger, and he wished that he could make himself feel that kind of rage, or pain, or grief, or anything that strong, but the emotional control drilled into him by a lifetime of his father's teachings just could not be dissipated so quickly, no matter how much he wished it could.

*Do it*, he said to himself. *You have to. There's no choice.*

"Harry," said Draco, and Harry looked up, his green eyes sparking with amusement, his mouth curving up into a smile.

"...Draco?" he replied, mimicking both Draco's use of his first name and his anxious tone. "What?"

Draco could hear his own blood pounding in his ears. *Why is this so hard?* he thought to himself, furiously. If there was one thing he was good at, one thing he had been practicing unvaryingly and with great dedication since he was eleven years old, it was getting Harry Potter angry. Maybe he hadn't gotten much practice at it in the past two months, but all those years of knowing exactly where to hit Harry to hurt him the most - that wasn't something he could just forget how to do.

Was it?

"What?" said Harry again, still smiling, getting to his feet. "Are you going to tell me you slept with Hermione again, just to get me mad? You said yourself that won't work."

"No," said Draco. "I'm not going to tell you that."

Something in Draco's tone made Harry's smile slip a notch. "What,

then?"

"When I died," said Draco, "I saw the Founders."

Harry shrugged. "I know - Hermione told me."

"They weren't the only ghosts in that place," said Draco, and waited. Surely Harry would know what he meant. He raised his eyes to Harry, saw his expression, that there was no smile on his face and his green eyes were blank; Draco couldn't read them.

Harry shook away the dark hair that had fallen into his eyes.

"Malfoy? What do you mean?"

"I mean I saw your parents, Potter."

The color went from Harry's face as if it had been slapped away.

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

Very slowly, Harry took the Gryffindor sword and turned to lean it against the wall. Then he turned back to face Draco. His green eyes were dark with confusion and a dawning mistrust. "That's not funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

"You're a liar," said Harry shortly, shaking his head. "You think I don't know that about you?"

Draco straightened his shoulders. He was vaguely aware of Fleur, somewhere off to his left, staring at them both with wide eyes, but the world had narrowed down to just him and Harry -- the way it had been for years; just him and Harry and what there was between them - call it opposition or hatred or whatever you like. The desire to hurt Harry as much as possible might have left him, but the ability to do it had not. Had, in fact, only grown stronger. How he would have killed, just last year, to know the things he knew about Harry now - how he felt, how he loved, what were the most

important things in the world to him. Hurting Harry had always been hitting out in the dark, but now it could be as precise and explicit as surgery; and he didn't want to do it, and yet he had to, because his father had always told him to consider every option and then pick the best one, and this might not be the *best* option, but as far as he could see, it was the only option.

*I'm not lying, Potter. It's the truth.*

No immediate reply came from Harry, just a shock wave of confusion and hurt and astonishment. Finally, he managed a shaky and very unconvincing smile. "You think I'm going to fall for this twice?"

Draco stared at him. "You think I'm lying about *this*?"

"Of course you are. I know you. You just can't see a belt without hitting below it, can you Malfoy? But I know what you're trying to do. Good thought, but you were right before -- it won't work."

Draco stared at him. *It's like you told me before, Potter. You can't lie telepathically. Did you forget?*

Harry went white, and this time seemed to have nothing at all to say.

Draco didn't look at him, just went on: *When I died, it wasn't all blackness. I went to a place in between life and death, where the murdered are waiting to be avenged. It's not a pleasant place. It's gray and cold, and the ghosts can't talk to each other, only to living people. I did talk to the Founders. Only when I was in the middle of talking to them someone else came up to me and asked me if I was Lucius Malfoy's son. It was your father.*

Now Draco did look up, and saw Harry staring at him, his eyes huge in his white face. His mouth moved, soundlessly. *No. I don't believe it. You talked to my father? You?*

Draco nodded. *And your mother.*

Harry put his hands behind him and felt for the wall, leaning back as if he was having trouble staying upright. *You´re lying. You must be.*

*You know I´m not.*

*I don´t understand...* Harry sounded dazed. *Why didn´t you tell me?*

*I talked to your mother. She wanted to know what you were like, what your life was like. And Sirius. They asked about Sirius. They think you went to live with him when they died. They don´t know about Azkaban or your aunt and uncle, or anything -- they think you had a happy childhood, all riding on flying motorcycles and running in fields with a big black dog -it´s pathetic, really--*

Something shattered in Harry´s face, something very basic and very necessary, and that, Draco knew, meant that Harry believed him; he wouldn´t look like that if he didn´t believe him. And now came the hard part. And it was hard. Harder than he had thought it could be - this was what he was good at, after all, and it really should have been easy. But it wasn´t. But he had to go on. *They´ve been there all this time, you know.. All the time you were growing up and I bet your aunt and uncle told you your parents were in Heaven; well, it wasn´t true, they´ve been waiting all this time for someone to come and avenge them--*

"Shut up," said Harry out loud, his voice dangerously low. "Just - shut up, Malfoy. You don´t--"

*But that´ll probably never happen because face it, for them to be avenged someone would have to kill the Dark Lord, and that I´m not sure that´s possible now that --*

"Get *out* of my head," hissed Harry, and hurled himself off the wall, fists clenched as if he were going to hit Draco. Draco braced himself, but Harry didn´t swing at him. He just stood there, shaking. Draco could feel the anger coming off him in waves, but it was very different than the emotion he had felt coming off Harry when he had gotten him to break the case in Lupin´s office - anger was only

a part of what Harry was feeling now: a toxic cocktail of guilt, confusion, frustration, horror, and terrible grief. *He'll never forgive me*, Draco thought, *and neither will Hermione, not for this*, and he pressed down on the thought the way he might have tightened his hand around a shard of glass, driving it into his skin, letting the pain lance up his arm and clear his mind and he heard his father's voice in his head: *Pain will make you stronger*.

"What's wrong with you, Malfoy?" Harry demanded, his voice coming out on a gasp. "Why the hell didn't you tell me any of this before? You should have told me right away, you lied to me, you're a *liar*--just like you've always been--"

*What good would it have done you? If what Wormtail told Hermione was true, and the Dark Lord is dead already, then there's nothing you can do, there's no way to avenge them and they'll be there forever and you'll never see them again, not even if you die.*

Harry stiffened, glaring at Draco, his eyes wild with fury and something else as well. "I told you to get out of my head," he hissed. "Don't you *listen*?"

*And they'll be there waiting for you to avenge them and wondering why you haven't - and thinking maybe you've forgotten all about them -*

"Shut *up*!" And now Harry did lunge at Draco, and caught him by the front of his shirt, slamming him hard back against the wall. For a moment, Draco thought the cracking sound he heard was his own head striking against the stone. Then he realized that it wasn't - the adamantine door behind Harry was splitting and fissuring. *Just a little more*, he thought. *Just a little --*

Harry's eyes were inches from his, the pupils so dilated they looked black. "What did you tell them?" he hissed. "*What did you say to my parents?*"

"Let go of me, Potter."

"Were you ever going to tell me? Were you?"



"Sirius told me not to tell you -"

"*Don't you blame this on Sirius!*" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs, and with an almighty rending crash, the door behind him blew inward. The force of the explosion, like a shock wave, knocked them all flat; Draco felt the ground hit him hard, knocking the wind out of him. He rolled over, slicing his hands on shards of adamantine, and sat up.

The door hung halfway off its hinges, swaying drunkenly. The floor of the chamber was littered with glittering bits of adamantine, like broken polar ice. Fleur was struggling to her knees, her bright hair powdered with sparkling shards. And Harry - Harry was sitting with his back against the wall, his face buried in his hands. The door gaped open behind him.

Draco looked at Harry, and heard the voice from his dream in his head. *For every profit in one thing, payment in some other thing.*

Draco got to his feet. He nodded at Fleur, and she went over to Harry. Vaguely, Draco could hear her whispering something to him. Harry got to his feet. He took his glasses off and began rubbing them against his shirt, looking down, but Draco could see even from where he was standing that Harry had been crying.

Draco looked down at his hands, then back up at Harry, who was still staring down at the floor as if it held all the secrets of the universe.

"We'd better go," he said, and without a word Harry about-faced and walked through the door as if he didn't remotely care what was on the other side. Grabbing up both the swords, Draco went after him.

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Hermione glanced up and down the corridor outside Bill's bedroom. Ginny's bedroom door was closed; so was Charlie's and Ron slept upstairs, on the top floor. The hallway was empty. Cautiously, she

reached into the pocket of the loose robes she had thrown on over her pajamas, and drew out the Lycanthe.

Immediately a sharp prickling shot up her arm and shoulder. She had felt the same prickling coming from the Lycanthe earlier that day whenever she had been near the Time-Turner. It was as if the Lycanthe was drawn to the Turner. At least, that was what it seemed like, what Hermione was banking on. It was instinct that was telling her what to do - which was unusual in and of itself, since usually Harry was the one who operated by instinct, while she navigated by the clear light of research and rationality. But with Harry gone, rational thought seemed to have departed. Instinct was left, and she was beginning to find out what a powerful force it was.

She raised her hand, the Lycanthe in it, and it quivered, almost with excitement. Hermione began following after its tugging, which became more and more pronounced as she neared the stairs. She raced down them at top speed, trying to be as quiet as possible - fortunately her feet were bare - and clattered into the dark living room. It was like being dragged forward by a very energetic and enthusiastic puppy. The Lycanthe did not seem to care whether there was a path for Hermione, as long as the space it had to go through was clear, but she managed to keep to her feet, only banging once and very painfully into the side of the sofa with her arm. She swore, but kept on going as the Lycanthe dragged her into the kitchen, dark except for the steady glow that came from the crackling fire. Hermione followed the tugging over to the fireplace, where she knelt down, heedless of the fact that she was getting soot all over her knees, and glanced up the chimney.

There was the silver box, stuck halfway up the flue between two bricks. Shoving the Lycanthe, now quivering like a struck tuning fork, into her pocket, she reached up and took hold of the box, lifting it down into her lap.

"Hermione, what do you think you're doing?"

She jumped so violently that she cracked her head on the architrave of the fireplace. It took a second for the pain to wear off; when it did, and she took her hand away from her head, she saw Ron

standing in the doorway of the kitchen. And he looked *angry*. His blue eyes were blazing and his red hair was sticking up around his head in bright red flames.

*Uh-oh*, she thought, getting to her feet. She bit her lip, hard, and her voice wobbled as she asked: "Did I wake you up?" Only then realizing that this was a stupid question, since Ron was not in his pajamas but wearing the jeans and blue crewneck sweater he had been wearing earlier that day. His hands were shoved into his pockets, but she could see even from where she was standing that they were balled into fists, which meant that he was more than just angry - he was furious.

"Hermione," he snapped. "What are you playing at?" He stalked across the room and snatched the box out of her hand. "Well?"

"I was just -"

"Sneaking around behind our backs? Going to see if you could figure out how to use the Turner on your own, never mind how dangerous it might be?"

"Ron, I--"

"I could tell just from your expression this afternoon that there was something on your mind, that's why I asked you. But far be it from you to tell me the truth. You didn't want Charlie to hide it because it might be dangerous, you wanted him to hide it so you could use it yourself!"

"Stop yelling at me!"

"Then tell me why you're bloody acting like this!"

Hermione had told herself she wasn't going to cry, but it was no use. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, but they filled up and overflowed. Angry tears scorched her cheeks. "No," she said. "It's got nothing to do with you, Ron."

Ron went even paler with anger than he had been before. Furiously,

he yanked the box open, and grabbed the Time-Turner out of it. He threw the box aside with a clatter and held the Turner up on its slim gold chain, winking and sparkling in the firelight. "Tell me what you want with this," he said, "or I swear, I'll throw it in the fire."

"No!"

"Yes. I'll do it."

She couldn't doubt his conviction. She raised her head, tasting her own tears in her mouth. "There are two ways you can use a Time-Turner," she said mechanically. "You can turn it over and over until you go as far back as you want to. Or you can set it to a specific time. That one is set."

"Set?" Ron glanced at the Turner, then back at her. "Set to what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But I am going to go and find out."

Ron shook his head. "No. Not you. Us. You think I'm going to let you go by yourself?"

Hermione raised her chin, tasting her own tears in her mouth.

"Ron," she said. *"I don't want you to come with me."*

He set his jaw in a stubborn line. "Why not?"

She took a shuddering breath. "Professor McGonagall told me - third year -" she said hastily. "Never to go back in time by more than a few days. That the further you go back, the harder is for you ever to ever return." She pointed at the Turner with a shaking hand. "That Turner belonged to the Founders. I saw them making it in my dream. I think it's set to a thousand years ago. That - that's what I believe."

"What?" Ron slowly lowered his hand. "And you were going to use it anyway?"

"I will do whatever it takes to help Harry. The Founders knew Slytherin was going to come back. And they knew that when he did,

their Heirs would have to try to figure out how to defeat him. They couldn't exactly leave an instruction book around for us because whatever they did, it was powerful, dark magic and they couldn't risk those spells falling into the wrong hands. So they left this -" and she pointed at the Turner - "locked in a place where only an Heir could find it. And it'll take me to them and then they can tell me what we need to do."

"You don't know that," said Ron, staring at her.

"No, I don't," Hermione admitted. "But it's a chance, so I have to take it."

"And how are you planning on getting back? Did that figure into your scheme?"

"I'll find a way back," she said stubbornly, gesturing with her hand. "I'll--"

Ron grabbed her wrist tightly. "You'll find a way? *That* sounds like a well-thought out plan. Don't you even care what happens to you? Do you want to be stuck somewhere forever with no way to come back?"

"If it will get me back to Harry *I will walk back!*" she shouted. "You wouldn't understand! You don't know how it feels--" she broke off at the look on his face, hurt and anger mixed together.

"You think you're the only one?" he shouted right back. "You think you're the only one who suffers or feels guilty about Harry being gone? You think you own all that pain, and that gives you the right to try to fix this all by yourself? Everything we've ever faced, we've faced together! Are you going to change that now just because you and Harry are *dating*? I thought we could do better than that."

He hurled himself around as if he were going to storm out of the room, and, suddenly afraid, she caught at his sleeve. "It's not that," she protested quickly. "It's this." She touched the Lycanthe around her neck, saw his eyes follow the gesture. "This gives me powers, Ron, Magid-level powers. If it didn't--"

"Oh, so now this is because I´m not a Magid," he snapped. "If I was Malfoy, you wouldn´t leave me behind."

"Ron, you´re nothing like Draco."

"And I bet you wish I was," said, with corrosive bitterness, and a flash of the old hatred in his eyes. "You think you know me so well. Don´t you?"

"It´s not a question of leaving you behind," she began, and then her voice broke, and she trailed off, looking up at him. She wondered what Draco would do in Ron´s place; probably he would either say something that would make her laugh or he would somehow trick her into bringing him with her. But Ron wouldn´t do that. He didn´t trick people, and unlike Draco everything he was feeling always showed on his face. Even Harry could hide what he was thinking better than Ron could. But then again, both Harry and Draco had grown up hiding what they felt from adults who were at a minimum dangerous and unloving; Ron, on the other hand, had been brought up being nothing but loved and couldn´t have hid a feeling if he´d been paid to. She looked into his eyes now and saw the wreck of her plans, realizing in that moment just how selfish she had been.

"Of course I know you so well," she said. "You´re my best friend."

There was a short silence. Ron stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at the floor. Finally, he looked up at her. "Am I?"

"You know you are," she said. "And I´m yours - I thought - aren´t I?"

"You are," he said. "But so is Harry. You think I don´t feel guilty? I keep thinking I could have -should have - done something. I should have realized that Charlie wasn´t Charlie earlier. Don´t I know my own brother? But, apparently, I don´t. I was too wound up thinking about how much I hated Malfoy to pay any attention."

"Why *do* you still hate Draco so much?"

"I don't - so much - any more," said Ron, a little hesitantly. He had the wary expression of someone about to yank off a bandage and anticipating the pain. "But I guess because - I was jealous."

"Because of Harry?"

Ron nodded.

Hermione leaned forward and took him by the shoulders - or tried to. He was too tall, so she ended up gripping his upper arms. "Ron," she said slowly. "Nobody could ever, ever replace you. Not for me. Not for Harry. You are the first friend Harry ever had. He wouldn't even know what it was like to have a friend if it wasn't for you. He wouldn't be who he is - I wouldn't either -- without you."

Ron looked down at her. "But you didn't want me to come with you," he said. "What does that prove?"

"Only that I didn't want anything to happen to you," she said truthfully, hoping he believed her. "I just feel so helpless," she added, her words coming out in an angry rush. "I've got no control over anything - there's no one to go to, and worst of all I've got no idea what's really going on and I feel like we're all hurtling towards some sort of horrible disaster without any way of stopping it. I feel like - like a pawn in some huge game I don't even understand." She raised her head and looked at him, and saw his expression with surprise. "Why are you smiling?"

"I was thinking about chess," said Ron. "Did you know that if the pawn can get all the way across the board, it becomes the most powerful player in the game?"

Hermione sniffled. "You know I'm terrible at chess." She reached out, took his hand. "I was wrong -- I *do* want you to come with me - not because I feel guilty," she added quickly, seeing his eyes narrow, "but because I could really use your help."

His shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly. "All right."

She held out her hand for the Time-Turner, and after a moment, he

gave it to her. She looped the chain around her neck, then threw it over his head as well. She was sharply reminded of having done the same thing with Harry three years ago. She looked up at Ron, the chain of the Turner cutting into her neck. "Ready?"

Nervously, he nodded.

Hermione took the Turner between her thumb and forefinger, and turned it over.

Absolutely nothing happened.

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The first thing he noticed was how quiet it was. He had been so long in darkness and clamorous noise, his extra-sensitive wolf ears picking up every vibration and the endless tinny howling of the Call, that the silence came as a greater shock than an explosion would have been. The last human thing he remembered was having been in the dungeon, in the cell with Sirius, telling him he should get out, get out while there was time...

Lupin's eyes flew open. He was lying on his back on a stone bench, staring up at a dank stone ceiling. *The dungeon*. Everything hurt, every part of his body, as if he had been pelted with stones. But he was whole. That he knew.

He turned his head to the side, slowly, trying to ignore the pain in his neck.

And saw Sirius. He was sitting on the ground next to the bench, his back against the stone wall, legs outstretched. He looked exhausted, even more than he did the night he'd flown his motorcycle across the Atlantic to get to King's Cross by the time the Hogwarts Express left, but his eyes were alight. "Moony?" he said.

Lupin rolled over onto his side, wincing at the pains that drove through his cramped muscles. "Sirius," he tried to say and he heard his own voice come out hoarse and nearly unrecognizable, as if it had been terribly strained. He cleared his throat. That hurt, too, but



it didn't matter. He sat up, and looked down at himself. He was wearing the clothes he had been wearing - yesterday? How long had he been a wolf?

"Sirius," he said again, louder this time. "What happened...?"

But Sirius was on his feet. He held out a hand to Lupin, who took it, and helped him to his feet. Then he embraced him, as he had embraced him that day three years ago in the Shrieking Shack, like a brother, although neither Sirius nor Lupin ever had a brother, or anything like one, outside of each other. Each other, and James.

"You're all right," said Sirius, pounding his friend on the back. "You're all right."

Lupin pulled back, wincing a little. "I am, I'm fine. I hurt all over as if I got steamrollered by a hippogriff, but I'm fine. Sirius, how long was I..?"

"Two days," said Sirius, and his black eyes darkened further. "Around two days."

"Did I hurt anyone?" Lupin felt his hand tighten hard on the blanket at his side. "Did I do - anything?"

"I brought in a doctor to see you," said Sirius, looking somber. "But you ate him."

Lupin felt his eyes widen, then he laughed, his chest tightening with pain but it was worth it just to laugh. "I suppose that's a no," he said. "Padfoot -- how could you - how did you bring me back?"

Sirius hesitated, then reached beside him and picked up a small clear flask banded with copper. "I didn't. Snape did. He gave me a Will-Strengthening Potion for you."

Lupin stared. "Really?"

"Uh-huh."

"And what did you have to do for him? *Sirius*. I´m not kidding. He wouldn´t just have done that for you for no reason."

"Well, I had to agree to run naked through the halls of Hogwarts yelling 'Severus Snape rules!' at the top of my lungs."

"Well, it´s a tragedy school isn´t in session then, isn´t it? There will be no one to admire your nude form."

"Good point." Sirius grinned at Lupin, his eyes lighting up as they so rarely did, and for so few people. Lupin could remember a time when Sirius had smiled at everybody. But that had been a long time ago. He looked down again at the flask in Sirius´ hands, and blinked - Sirius was wearing heavy leather gloves that reached halfway up his forearms. They looked like dragonhide. His left sleeve was ripped through, and bloody. *I did that*, he thought, his heart sinking.

"Padfoot, how did you get me to take the Potion?"

"You were pretty far gone," said Sirius flatly. "It wasn´t that hard. And I borrowed Narcissa´s gardening gloves -" he raised his right hand and grinned - "she usually uses them for trimming the Firetrap plants in the front garden."

"But I didn´t bite you," said Lupin, anxiously. "Did I?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. Which begs an interesting question. If you did, would I be a Weredog?"

Lupin sat down on the bench, more out of exhaustion than anything else, and grinned. "Shut up, Sirius."

Sirius smiled back. Then his smile faded. "I have to ask you..." He cleared his throat. "Do you remember anything?"

Lupin shut his eyes. Lightning danced across his field of vision, and pressed against the backs of his eyes. Black night, silver moonlight, forest paths; a castle rearing up out of the darkness, black against a white sky. A voice at the base of his skull. *Come. Here. Now.* At

night, the battlements were the color of liquid mercury. Guards stood ranged along them in robes of black and silver. He saw a familiar face, turned towards him, pale hair and eyes, sensed betrayal, darkness.

His eyes flew open. "I do remember," he said, raising his eyes to Sirius'. "I remember everything - the Call - everything."

Sirius leaned forward. "I'd better tell you what's been going on."

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The first thing Draco saw on the other side of the doorway was that they were not, in fact, outside. They were in what was probably the most enormous room he had ever seen: bigger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts or the ballroom at Malfoy Manor. The walls were green-veined marble and rose up and up and up - how far underground *were* they? - terminating in a ceiling so high its detail was lost in darkness, as was the far end of the room. The floor was marble, too, smooth and slippery. The center of the room curved down into a huge circular depression, not deep or large enough to be an amphitheater, although it resembled nothing else. It was empty.

Harry crossed to the edge of the circular depression and stared down into it, his face still quite blank. Draco looked at him, then turned back towards the door through which they had come. "Fleur -"

He paused. And stared.

Fleur wasn't there. And the door through which they had come had vanished.

He blinked his eyes shut, then opened them again.

The wall he faced was as smooth, flat and unmarked as if there had never been a door there at all.

Draco's stomach turned over, hard. He didn't know what was going on, but had a felling that whatever it was, he wasn't going to like it.

He spun around and saw that Harry was still standing where he had been, motionless, staring into space. Gritting his teeth, he walked over to him and held out the Gryffindor sword. Without changing expression, Harry took it.

"Potter," Draco said. "We appear to have a problem."

Harry turned and gave him an unnervingly blank look. "I noticed. Fleur's disappeared and so has the door. We appear to be locked in a room together. Again," he added, as if the concept was distasteful. "I told you we couldn't trust her."

"Potter -" Draco reached his hand out.

Harry hurled himself around, fists clenched. 'Don't you *touch* me," he hissed. "Don't even think about it."

Draco quickly retracted his hand.

"I had to do it," he said, in a flat voice. "You *know* that."

"Yeah. Whatever." Harry shook his head, looking Draco straight in the eye, and there was something in his expression that Draco hadn't seen there in months -- contempt. "Just shut up, Malfoy. I really don't feel like hearing your voice right now."

"Are you planning on being hacked off about this forever?" Draco snapped.

"Yes," said Harry flatly. "Yes, that would be the plan as it stands now. Since I discarded the smashing-your-face-in plan as impracticable."

"Look." Draco swatted down his own rising irritation. "I'm -- *sorry*."

Harry looked unimpressed. "Good for you."

Draco blinked, stunned. Stunned that he had apologized, and more stunned that Harry hadn't accepted it. Wasn't that a rule of

apologies? Didn't the other person have to accept them? Wasn't that the *point*?

Apparently not.

"You just don't get it, do you," added Harry. "I thought you were my *friend*," and there was, to Draco's ears at least, less bitterness in his voice than disgust.

"I told you yesterday that I wasn't," said Draco, his own anger suddenly rising to the surface. "Don't you remember? Why are you acting like I stabbed you in the back? I didn't."

"No, you stabbed me in the front. Good for you. Congratulations on not lying for once," Harry spat, "*Malfoy*."

The urge to hit Harry very, very hard was suddenly overwhelming. Draco took a breath, trying to still the shaking in his hands. When he was younger, he used to shake with reaction after especially tense Quidditch matches - not just little shivers but prolonged hard tremors that wracked his entire body. He was shaking like that now. If he tried to hit Harry, he would probably miss. Not that that was necessarily such a bad thing, considering - he wished there was some way he could tell the exact level of the Potion left in his blood. He didn't know what would happen when it wore off. Maybe nothing. Maybe -

Harry's voice pierced his thoughts. "*Malfoy*..."

Draco didn't turn around, but he felt his teeth grind together. "*What?* What do you want me to do, Potter?"

In answer, Harry's hand shot out and grabbed the back of his cloak, spinning him around roughly. He heard Harry's voice say, "Right now, I pretty much want you to panic."

*Panic?*

Draco stared. Something was emerging from the shadows at the far end of the room. Something huge. Something so enormous it was

unreal, a monster out of a nightmare, out of legend, something that couldn't possibly really exist...

But it did. It was nearly as big as a dragon and the shadow it cast on the wall behind it was twisted and grotesque. It had a lion's body, only much larger than any lion Draco had ever imagined. Leathery dragon wings were folded along its sides, and its huge, misshapen lion's head was crowned with a man's face the size of a giant's. Foot-long sparkling claws extended from its paws, and its tail was not a tail at all but a long, supple-looking scorpion's barbed stinger which whipped back and forth with the speed of a striking snake as it advanced slowly towards them.

For once, Draco could think of absolutely nothing clever to say.

"What," said Harry very slowly, "the hell...is that?"

"Manticore," said Draco briefly, and raised his hand. "*Accio!*" His sword flew into his grasp. Harry was already holding his, but not with a lot of attention. He was staring at the manticore as it advanced on them. Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Harry raise his hand, point it towards the monster -

"*Stupefy!*" he shouted.

The jet of light that shot from his fingers struck the manticore squarely in the chest. It roared and reared back, and as its huge shadow fell over them, Draco realized what the very odd falling sensation in his stomach actually was. *Ah. I'm completely terrified.*

He glared at Harry. "Well done, Potter. You've managed to piss it off. Did you know that its sting carries the most deadly poison known to man? Just thought I'd mention it."

Harry ignored him. He was looking at the monster with narrowed eyes. *It's too big for a Hex to kill it, isn't it. Well, I killed a basilisk with this sword. I can kill this too.*

Draco felt his jaw drop open. *Harry, what?*

*I'm going to kill it.* Harry gave him a final, disgusted look. *You can stay here,* and with that, he tightened his grip on his sword and raced towards the mantichore as if he had completely lost his wits which, Draco pondered, he possibly had. Even the mantichore seemed surprised, as if it couldn't quite believe its eyes either. Draco didn't blame it. People probably didn't run towards it with great enthusiasm all that often. This most likely accounted for why it actually allowed Harry to get within striking distance. Draco watched in astonishment as Harry completed his race towards the mantichore, and drove his sword into its chest.

The mantichore roared, a terrible, earsplitting howl that sounded like a thousand trains pulling into a thousand stations all at once. It reared back and struck out with its paw, which sent Harry spinning into the air. He crashed into a wall, fell to the floor, and lay still.

Seizing the hilt of the sword with its teeth, the mantichore yanked the blade out of its chest, spit it onto the floor, and advanced on Harry, its barbed stinger swishing furiously. Draco felt a jolt of cold spread up his arm from his own sword. If it could have spoken, he knew what it would say, *Let it kill him.*

Harry struggled to sit up; and then Draco couldn't see his face as the mantichore moved to block him...

Draco raised his hand. "*Impedimenta!*"

The Hex struck the monster in the side. It spun around, glaring furiously. Draco waved his arms. "Hey!" he yelled, although his mouth was very dry. "Over here! You big, hairy, uh, overgrown...get away from him!" He paused and blinked. *Get away from him? I can't believe I said that.*

Harry's voice spoke in the back of his head. *And neither can I.*

But the mantichore appeared to have no such problem suspending disbelief. It whirled, roared, and plunged towards Draco, its claws skittering along the marble. He stared, too afraid to even really feel any fear. He couldn't imagine his fencing skills were going to do him any good at all, it was simply too big and too fast and too-

It struck out at him with a paw. He threw himself flat and felt the claws whistle over his head. The mantichord made a low rumbling sound deep in its chest - laughter. It's playing with me, he thought in disbelief. *Bastard*. He sat up, and the next swipe knocked him flat again, the claws raking his shirt, drawing blood. Wincing, he rolled onto his back and looked up - to see the huge, poison-barbed tail arch back, and then whip forward towards his prone form with the speed of a striking snake. He had time to throw his arms over his face, time to think two words - *deadly poison* - and then something swished over his head, and there was a hard thwack as something else struck the ground next to him.

It missed, he thought. It missed me - and then he heard a bellow of anguish so loud it split his ears. He jerked upright, and saw Harry standing over him, his sword upraised and covered in blood, and behind him the mantichord, rearing and spitting in agony, thrashing its tail, which was now jetting blood like a fountain. Harry had sliced it in half on its downward stroke, and the thump that Draco had heard had been the sound of the severed scorpion-tail landing next to him. It lay on the stone floor in a widening pool of viscous red and black liquids, curling and uncurling a little, spasmodically, about a foot long and as thick around as his arm.

Rolling over, he seized the tail, dropping his sword as he did so, wincing at the slimy touch on his hand, careful not to grasp it near its poisonous barbed end. He sprang to his feet, vaguely aware that he was drenched in mantichord blood, vaguely aware of Harry, holding his sword and looking as tiny in front of the rearing monster as a piece of debris in the face of an oncoming wave, shouting something at him, vaguely aware of the mantichord's furious yells as he darted towards it - it lunged, snapping at him and he saw its double row of razor-sharp teeth - he drew his arm back and as hard as he could *threw* the barbed stinger into the monster's gaping open mouth.

Reflexively, its teeth snapped down, its throat working to swallow-- then it froze in place, choking and gurgling, lashing its head furiously from side to side as if it could rid itself of its own poison. Its knees began to buckle, and it screamed. Not like an animal might



scream, but a human scream of pain and agony. The monster's screams knifed into Draco's ears, sending him staggering back, stumbling, and he felt Harry catch him hard around the arm, steadying him. Harry let go almost immediately, and the two boys stood and stared as the mantichore gave another, final howl and crashed to the ground like a tree falling, its tail still jetting blood, rolling onto its back, head lolling, limbs rigid as broomsticks.

"Is it dead?" Harry hissed, his voice hard.

"Not yet," said Draco, and almost as if it had heard him, its huge dinner-plate eyes snapped wide open and staring. And it spoke. "You," it snarled, and its voice was like gravel running over sandpaper. Its gaze was fixed on Draco, who almost involuntarily took a step forward. The mantichore's scarlet-black eyes followed his movement, glittering. "You," it said again. "I am dying, and so I know you." The beast's eyes rolled, the whites showing briefly. It seemed to be struggling to move. "Master," it growled. "Why do you slay me? It was you who made me what I am."

Draco stared, feeling his heart beating in slow, uneven thumps as the adrenaline slowly drained out of his veins, leaving him dizzy and sick. "No," he said, his voice harsh. "Not me."

"I know you," said the mantichore again, and then a great spasm wracked its body; its eyes shut, and it died.

After the howls and the screaming and the deafening sounds of the fight, the silence that descended on the room once the mantichore was dead was profound. Draco turned slowly, and looked at Harry. And got something of a shock. Harry was drenched in blood - a little of his own, probably, but mostly the monster's. His shirt was soaked scarlet, his hands covered in blood, his hair plastered to his head and scarlet rivulets running down his face and neck. Without looking at Draco, he said, flatly, "Give me your cloak."

Numbly, Draco took it off and handed it to him. Harry plucked off his glasses, used the edge of the cloak to clean the blood off them, and then handed the cloak back to Draco, sliding his glasses back onto his nose. Through the newly cleaned lenses, he regarded the

dead monster with narrowed eyes. His voice, when he spoke, was cold. "I guess we won."

"It's dead, if that's what you mean." Draco glanced down at himself. He was splattered with blood as well, but not nearly as drenched as Harry. He looked up and found the other boy staring at him, his face streaked with blood, eyes burning with an unnerving green fire.

"It said something to you," said Harry, gesturing at the manticore. "What did it say?"

Draco blinked in surprise. "You mean you didn't understand it?"

Harry shook his head, narrowing his eyes. "No. No, I didn't."

*It just asked me why I--*

"Stay *out* of my head," Harry snapped, backing away as if distance could snap the connection between them. "We're not okay. Did anything give you the idea that we were okay?"

"You saved my life," said Draco, too wrung out to dissemble or pretend.

"I would have done that for anyone," said Harry flatly.

There was a short, unpleasant silence. Then Draco began, "But I -"

"Shut *up*, Malfoy," interrupted Harry with such savagery that Draco did, in fact, shut up. "I think you should just--" and then his eyes went wide and his jaw dropped open and Draco turned around to see what he was looking at, and got such a shock that he felt as if his stomach had caved in.

Fleur was standing only a few feet from them, a look of curious interest on her face. She was flanked by six tall hooded gray-clad men who could only be guards, their faces half-hidden by the hoods of their robes. And beside her stood Salazar Slytherin. He had one hand on her shoulder, and he was smiling.

Behind them, the door had reappeared in the wall.

Draco froze, then went for his sword, but it was too late. "*Ligatus*," said Slytherin swiftly, raising his hand, and Draco suddenly found his arms snapped behind his back, his wrists bound tightly together with what felt like metal bands. He turned his head and saw the same had happened to Harry; his wrists were bound tightly behind him, and from the blue-white gleam at his back, Draco suspected the cuffs were made of adamantine.

Having bound them, Slytherin appeared to briefly lose interest in the boys. He walked over to the dead body of the manticore and knelt down, seeming to study it, his eyes dark and unreadable. Finally he raised his head, and looked at Harry and Draco. "You killed it," he said. "Did you not?"

Neither of them replied.

"Have you no answer for me?" the Snake Lord demanded.

"Oh, I´ve got an answer for you all right," said Draco, "only you can´t see it, because my hands are tied behind my back."

Then Harry spoke. His voice was flat with hatred. "Yes, we killed your monster," he said. "We killed it, and it died horribly, and we are not sorry."

"As well you should not be," said Slytherin, standing up, a smile beginning on his face. "I brought you here to kill it. Thank you both, very much."

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"I can´t believe you tried to use it without me."

"*Ginny*..."

"You should have known it wouldn´t work. How thick are you?"

"Very thick," said Ron fervently. He was sitting on the end of Ginny's bed, Hermione beside him, both of them looking abashed and sincere. "Very, very thick. Especially Hermione."

Hermione hit him on the shoulder. "I am *not* thick."

"Ow," said Ron.

Ginny sat up and grinned. She hadn't been all that surprised when Ron and Hermione had come into her room and woken her up, nor had she been all that surprised when they'd told her what they had tried to do. And she had been particularly unsurprised that it hadn't worked. The Turner was hers, after all, she'd known that the moment she touched it. She held out her hand for it now, and Hermione placed the tiny sparkling hourglass in her palm. The light struck a sharp gold spark off the Turner that lanced into her eyes. She shut them quickly, but not before the dark red afterimages had begun to form a picture against the back of her eyelids - she saw a huge field when men and beasts strove together, and smoke rising above it, and -

She opened her eyes with a start, feeling that she was beginning to understand exactly why Hermione thought her own dreams were so important. The man in the dream she had had earlier had looked so much like Harry, even down to the untidy hair so black that it seemed like it should leave marks, like paint or soot, on his face where it brushed his skin. But he hadn't been Harry...he had been someone very different. She had felt about him the way she felt about her own brothers, her flesh and blood. And she had called him Godric.

She raised her eyes and smiled at Hermione and her brother. "Thanks." She looped the chain around her neck, and gestured that they should scoot towards her.

"Wait a second," said Hermione, indicating Ginny's lacy white nightdress. "Don't you want to--change your clothes?"

Ron hopped up off the bed. "I have to go get something anyway," he said, and left the room. By the time he returned, Ginny was dressed

in jeans and a pullover jumper?, and she and Hermione were sitting on the bed, the gold chain of the Turner looped around their necks, looking at him expectantly.

"What did you go to get?" Hermione asked curiously as he sat down beside them on the bed.

"Nothing," said Ron, waving his hand airily. "Just something I thought we might need. You know," he added, reaching over to loop the chain around his own neck as well, "It occurs to me that Charlie is going to be furious when he wakes up and finds us gone."

Hermione smiled. "If it works properly, he´ll never know we were gone at all. We´ll be back when we left."

"And if it doesn´t work properly?"

"Then we´ll have way bigger problems than Charlie. Like being stuck in the past forever."

"It might not be so bad. We can invent the wheel and get rich."

"Ron. It´s a thousand years ago, not a million. They *had* the wheel."

"I knew that."

"As far as you´re concerned, history class is just something that happens to other people, isn´t it?"

"This from the girl who´s still bitter that there are only seven years of school."

"Quit bickering," said Ginny firmly, "and hold on," and she flipped the Time-Turner over.

The world turned upside down.

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Harry stared, flabbergasted. Even Draco seemed to be having a

slight difficulty controlling his expression. He actually looked surprised for a millisecond, before his usual look of smug amusement returned. "Well, well," he said, looking from Slytherin to Fleur and back again. "This seems to be developing into a distinctly boring situation."

Harry glared over at him. Didn't he ever know when to shut up? Ever? He had to admit that at some points he had rather envied Draco's ability to come up with witty remarks in even the most horrendous circumstances. Now, however, he just wanted to bash in his head and shut him up for good.

Fleur seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Draco, be quiet," she said, warningly.

"Be quiet?" burst out Harry, although he privately rather agreed with her. "*Be quiet?* Is that all you have to say?"

Fleur raised her chin, her dark-blue eyes wide. "It is not for me to say anything at all," she said, "it is for my Master to say."

Harry felt as if his jaw were hanging off its hinges. "Your *Master?*"

Fleur looked delicately remorseful. "Surely you are not really surprised," she said. "Surely you guessed." She turned to Draco. "When you would not give me a source of power," she said, "I had to find another. I had to. You don't understand --"

Draco turned cold gray eyes on her. "Shut up," he said flatly, "you traitorous bitch," and Fleur looked shocked.

"Now, now," said Slytherin, still smiling his off-kilter smile, "that is no way to talk to my Source."

"Your *Source?*" Now even Draco looked shocked, and somewhat thrown. "Her?"

Slytherin took a step towards him. Draco flinched back almost imperceptibly. "Did you think," said the Snake Lord, "that when you refused to serve me, I would not find another to take your place?"

And she's almost as cute as you are..."

Draco said nothing. He stared at the ground. Standing behind him, Harry could see his hands knotted together. He had been pulling against the cuffs, but had stopped.

"That does not mean that I have no further use for you, Draco," said Slytherin. "You have exceeded my expectations of you. Many have faced the manticore and many have died. You are to be congratulated."

Draco said nothing, didn't look towards Harry, didn't move. Harry had begun to feel like he might as well not have been there since nobody seemed to be paying attention to him. He would have liked to take the opportunity that being ignored offered him to do something brave and heroic, but couldn't think of a thing, other than running up and kicking Slytherin in the ankles, which seemed ineffectual. *It's not much bloody good being a Magid*, he thought bitterly, *if you still need your hands to do magic*.

"Nobody else could have done it," said Slytherin. "That is why I had my Source bring you here." He smiled over at Fleur. "I must thank her, and you both," and here his gaze skidded briefly over Harry, for the first time. "My enemies placed that monster here to guard the one object that can return my powers to me. Only an Heir of the Founders could have defeated it. You two seemed like the obvious choices. Especially the Gryffindor heir, since he fancies himself a monster-killer," and his icy gaze darted over Harry. "He murdered my basilisk, tried to destroy my descendant - I thought it only justice that he should kill the manticore for me." His look of hatred faded as his gaze turned back to Draco. "Truly, boy, you did an excellent job. My thanks."

There was a short silence. Harry rather expected Draco to make some kind of smart remark. Instead, he said, flatly, "I only did what I had to do."

Harry blinked, wondering what Draco meant by that, exactly. The Snake Lord did not seem at all perplexed, however. He walked up to Draco, and as he had done to Harry in the Weasleys' kitchen,

touched his hand to Draco's face. Draco didn't move or flinch away or even acknowledge the gesture.

Slytherin tilted his head to the side, his dark eyes boring into Draco's. "As your ancestor, boy, I am proud of you. I wonder what the rest of them would say, if they were alive at this moment?"

"Probably 'Let me out of this crypt! It's dark in here!'" Draco suggested.

Slytherin laughed, something Harry would not have imagined he could do. He must be in a good mood about the mantichore being defeated, he realized with a sinking heart. They had been tricked every step of the way, tricked by Fleur, the guards had probably been sent to convince them that they really were escaping instead of just heading deeper into the castle. Fleur had never come in through the adamantine door, either. It must have been sealed that way for centuries, protecting whatever the mantichore was guarding. Fleur had simply led them there. And they had been fooled. We are so stupid, thought Harry, such *idiots*.

"You have earned yourself a reward. You will come with me now, and we will discuss it. That is," Slytherin added, "if you are willing."

He gave the word *willing* an emphasis that made it sound like another word entirely. A word like *death*. A word like *choice*. A word like *last chance*.

Draco raised his head. His eyes looked dark, nearly black, but perhaps that was only a trick of the light. "I am tired of fighting you," he said. "I ran away from you, and I spilled my blood and I took potions to hide myself from you and I even *died*, and still you won't leave me alone."

"No," said the Snake Lord, dropping his hand from Draco's face. "And I never will."

Draco closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked determined. "Unbind me," he said.



Slytherin looked at him.

"Unbind me," said Draco again.

Slytherin glanced at Fleur. Then he lifted his hand and extended it towards Draco. "*Liberas*," he said.

The cuffs fell from Draco's wrists to the marble floor with a clatter, and vanished. Slowly, Draco brought his arms forward, and began rubbing the feeling back into his wrists. He looked at Slytherin. "Thank you," he said.

Harry felt a very odd, very cold feeling begin to spread through his stomach.

"You are my descendant," said the Snake Lord. "You should not be bound."

"Oh, I very much agree with that," said Draco, and he grinned, not at anyone in particular. He seemed different than he had a short while ago, his posture tense and coiled, eyes alight with angry energy. He looked like a thoroughbred animal gone feral, an animal you wouldn't want to approach, for fear of being bitten. "So I have a question," he added, rocking back on his heels. "You've untied me. What do you plan to do with Harry?"

Once again, Slytherin looked over at Harry. His eyes were full of cold fire and hatred. Fleur did not look over, she appeared to be industriously studying the ground. "The Gryffindor heir has served his purpose," said the Snake Lord. "You could not have defeated the Manticore without him. But now that is done, now my full power can be returned; now, he will serve me better dead than alive. Guards," and Slytherin's mouth quirked into a vicious sort of smile as he glanced up, "Bring the boy here."

Two guards detached themselves from the group, strode over to Harry, and seized him. He struggled, his feet sliding in manticore blood, but it was no use - they were stronger than he was and without his hands, he was helpless. They dragged him forward until he stood less than a foot from Slytherin, almost face to face with

Draco.

"So," said Slytherin, looking from Draco to Harry and back again. "The Heir of Gryffindor - what shall I do with him?"

Harry saw Fleur jerk her head up and stare in disbelief; Draco however, didn't move at all. He stood with his chin raised, his gray eyes unwavering, and he had never looked more than he did that moment like Lucius Malfoy's son. Even splashed with blood, clothes torn and filthy, he had the same defiant tilt to his chin, the same pride and coldness; he looked as much like his father as Harry had been told that he himself looked like James. Draco's ice-water gaze slid over Slytherin, over the guard that surrounded the Snake Lord, over Fleur, and then over to Harry himself. Their eyes met for a split second -- there was nothing in Draco's eyes, no expression- no fear or fury, hatred or despair, passion or compassion. Nothing. He looked at Harry, and then he looked back at Slytherin.

"Do what you like with him," he said. "It doesn't matter to me."

Slytherin's eyes opened wide with surprise; for a moment, he almost looked human. Then he turned to the guards. "Take the Gryffindor boy back to the adamantine cell," he said, and he looked briefly over at Harry, his black eyes considering. "Chain him up," he added, and the guards moved forward and, surrounding Harry, began to drag him away. He struggled to look back, not knowing why he wanted to, only that he did, and saw Draco and Slytherin standing together by the body of the dead manticore, Fleur a little ways away. From a distance, it was hard to tell which of the two men was Draco, and before Harry could discern the difference, the guards had dragged him through the door and shut it firmly behind them.

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#### References:

- 1) "When you can flatten entire cities at a whim, a tendency towards

quiet reflection and seeing-things-from-the-other-fellow's-point-of-view is seldom necessary." Terry Pratchett, 'Small Gods.'

2) Nightmare Grass comes from The Secret Country by Pamela Dean. So does the idea of shapechangers who you have to kill in every shape they can transform into.

3) "My hovercraft is full of eels." Monty Python.

4) " Sirius brandished the book in the air. "Demons, Demons, Demons - what a title." "It´s a book about demons. What would you call it?" -- Angel.

5) "This seems to be developing into a distinctly boring situation." -- Blackadder.

6) Nightmare Grass is from Pamela Dean's book: The Hidden Land, available from Firebird books. Used with permission.

Draco Sinister

## Chapter Twelve - The Persistence of Memory

Charlie was never actually sure exactly what it was that suddenly woke him up in the middle of that night. Later, he would think it was a vague feeling of uneasiness, the sense that all was not right with the world. More likely, it was a sudden craving for chocolate biscuits.

He got up and pulled on a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, and headed downstairs to the kitchen, padding quietly on bare feet. He went through the living room into the kitchen, and lit the fire under the teapot on the stove with a flick of his wand and a muttered "*incendius*." Lazily, he Summoned a pack of biscuits from the cupboard and began eating them methodically, glancing absently at the clock on the wall as he did so. That it was late, or early depending on how one looked at it, he could tell from the lightening gray sky outside the window. It also looked like it was about to rain.

The kettle had begun to boil. He reached out and plucked it off the stove - then paused, and looked at the clock on the wall again.

*Bang!* The kettle hit the ground as Charlie's suddenly nerveless fingers released their grasp on the handle, and boiling water splashed his feet, but he barely noticed. He was already moving quickly across the room towards the wall where the gold-framed clock hung, leaning his head back, and staring at it with an incomprehension that bordered on shock.

There was each gold hand with the name of a Weasley child or parent etched on it - Percy's said "work," Bill's "home" and Fred and George seemed to be "at a wild party. Don't wait up!" And there was his own hand, set firmly on "visiting family."

And then there were the hands that said *Ron* and *Ginny*. Neither of the hands was on "home", or "travelling," or even "mortal peril." Instead, they were doing something Charlie had never seen before - spinning in wild circular sweeps around the face of the clock, over and over, directionless and unceasing, as if wherever his little brother and sister had gone, it was somewhere so far that even the magic of the clock couldn't find them....

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When Ginny turned the Time-Turner over, the world vanished from under Hermione's feet. It was like using the Time-Turner McGonagall had given her, and yet not like it, as if that feeling had been amplified a hundred times. She felt herself shot backward as if hurled from a cannon, everything spinning away behind her eyes into gray mist. She threw her hand out and caught at something - Ron's hand - she seized his fingers and gripped them with terrific force. She felt him grip her hand in return, and a desperate relief flooded through her - Ron was alive, he returned the clasp on her hand, she was not alone. She gasped in relief - or tried to.

There was no air. She gasped again, in disbelief, but her lungs strained at the vacuum. *I'm dying*, she thought, and a desperate fear raced through her veins. Beating it back, she thought of Harry. She could not die. She had to get to Harry, to protect him. Without her, Harry would die. That Harry had survived the second year of his life at all proved that it was possible to keep someone alive by loving them enough.

Her vision was suddenly split by shards of blue light, and for a split second she saw Harry, actually saw him, as clearly as if he stood before her. He sat with his back to a blue wall, his hands behind him, and his clothes were torn as if they had been shredded by the claws of some wild animal. His slender body sagged as if he were exhausted, and she couldn't see his face - his head was bowed, his face hidden by dark hair, and he was ... covered in blood.

She threw herself forward, just as the vision vanished, the world sealing itself back up. She felt Ron's hand scrabble after hers, but their fingers slipped, barely touching now - and he was gone. *No!*

She flailed out towards Ron with her hand, but she could neither see nor feel anything beyond the heaving, freezing gray mist, and the chain of the Time-Turner was gone from her throat -

"Oh!" Hermione gasped out loud as the gray mist suddenly vanished and she pitched forward hard, slamming her hands into the ground. Her knees collapsed and for a moment she just lay still, catching her breath, her eyes screwed shut.

When she opened them, the first thing she saw was brilliant blue sky. This was disconcerting. Not, however, as disconcerting as the realization that she was no longer connected to Ron and Ginny via the chain of the Time-Turner.

She hurled herself into a sitting position and stared around wildly.

Rubble. She was sitting among a mass of rubble, the remnants of some huge structure which had suffered a massive bout of destruction: broken stone and smashed glass littered the churned earth, as did the trunks of trees ripped from the ground, their roots clawing the sky. The air carried a smell of burning wood: sticky pitch, sharp-burning cedar. Huge listing chunks of stone showed where there had once been walls: one was even adorned with a shredded remnant of tapestry, another sported a staircase that ended abruptly in midair.

Hermione's eyes saw all this as she scanned the scene, but she barely took it in. She was searching, her heart pounding...

There. A flash of red.

She leaped to her feet and raced forward, staggering over broken paving stones and twisted bits of metal that looked as if they had been melted in some great blast. Nearly tripping over a pile of smashed stones, she rounded a corner and saw Ron.

He was kneeling on a pile of broken stone, gazing around with a rueful expression. Hermione flew over to him and threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely before he had a second to react.

"Oww..gerroff Hermione. No need to shake me. I´m not a martini," he said, looking rather gratified anyway. "I´m okay. Landed just fine. For a second there I thought I´d dropped the Invisibility Cloak," he added, pulling the silvery Cloak out of his pocket briefly and showing it to her before tucking it back in. "Gave me a horrid turn."

She released him, and giggled - Ron was so covered in dust and ash that his flame-red hair was streaked with white, and he was indescribably filthy. He immediately seemed to know exactly why she was laughing.

"You look just as bad as I do," he pointed out, rubbing his cheek with the back of his sleeve, which served to redistribute the dirt without actually removing any of it. "Don´t think you don´t."

But Hermione had quickly sobered. "Ginny -"

Ron paled under the layers of ash. "She´s not with you?"

"I´m over here," came Ginny´s voice. Hermione turned and saw the slender figure of Ginny clambering over an upended tree trunk. Like Ron, she was filthy, her face and hands streaked black with ash and dirt. "What *happened* here?" she demanded crossly, tossing back her flaming hair. "It looks like Fred and George set off the world´s biggest Filibuster Firecracker."

"Aftermath of a magical battle," said Hermione briefly, and shivered. It was *cold*, despite the brilliance of the sun. She recognized the slant of it as winter sunlight. Which made sense - if a time turner could take them back to any year, surely it could take them back to any season of that year. She just wished she´d dressed more warmly.

"Must have been a hell of a battle," said Ron, looking impressed. "I´ve never seen anything so destroyed. At this point, a direct hit by a meteorite would count as gentrification."

"Mmm," agreed Hermione, not really listening.

Ron reached out and touched her cheek lightly. "What is it, Hermione?"

"I´m just wondering where everyone is. Why would the Turner be set to bring us back to a place where everything is destroyed? We must have arrived after the battle with Salazar..."

"Where are we?" demanded Ginny, glancing around.

"Just where we were," said Hermione. "The Time-Turner moves you in time, not place. So it looks like your father was right - the Burrow was a castle, once. Only it was razed down to the foundations. But there must be some survivors..."

"*Survivors!*"

For a moment, Hermione thought she was hearing an echo. Then, glancing up, she saw someone poised on a slant of overhanging rock above where she, Ron and Ginny were standing. Instinctively, she stepped back, trying to push Ron and Ginny behind her. The sunlight was behind the person standing above them, so she could see clearly only the outline of a robed wizard or witch, wand out, staring down at them. "Survivors!" the person shouted again - it was a boy´s voice - and Hermione realized that he was talking about them. "Are you all right down there?" he called.

"We´re fine," Hermione called up. "But we´re not survivors...I mean, not literally. We--"

Apparently, the boy decided that this claim merited further investigation. In the space of a moment, he had leaped down from his rock and landed lightly on his feet in front of them, still holding his wand.

Hermione made a little gurgling sound in her throat, and stared.

It was Harry.

Only it wasn´t Harry as he was now, not the almost-seventeen-year



old Harry who even now scared her a little with his grown-up-ness and the fact that occasionally (not that often) he needed to shave. This was Harry as he had been the first time she'd seen him, small and skinny and eleven, with his dark green eyes the biggest feature of a face still round with the last vestiges of childhood. Only this boy's eyes weren't green; he wore no glasses, and his forehead was unmarked. Like a Gryffindor Quidditch player, his wizarding robes were scarlet, although of a very archaic cut. And perhaps the most surprising thing about him was that he regarded them with no surprise at all.

"You're the Heirs, aren't you?" he said, raising his eyebrows very slightly. "I've been waiting for you."

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"*Demons, Demons, Demons?*" Narcissa said, pushing the heavy book back across the table to Sirius. "What a title."

"That's what *I* said," grinned Sirius. Narcissa smiled back at him. He looked ten years younger than he had that morning - still worried, the lines of strain around his mouth and eyes remained, and he repeatedly checked the bracelet around his wrist to make sure that the Vivicus charm was still glowing, but the hopeless look of the morning had gone from his eyes. She knew this was due to the fact that Lupin was all right, and was happy for him.

She touched the covering of the book he had brought upstairs lightly with the palm of her hand. "Where did you get this, anyway?"

"Snape," said Sirius, looked pleased with himself.

"You told him about the demon in the cellar?" Narcissa was surprised.

"Well, it came up in conversation. 'So, Sirius, how you doing? What's that you say? Minions from hell getting you down? Have I got the book for you.'"

"Somehow that doesn't sound like something Severus would say."

"Severus," mimicked Sirius good-humoredly. "Ikkle Sevvie. I haven't heard anyone call him Severus, except Dumbledore, for years. Not that I ever called him that -"

"No," said Lupin, appearing in the doorway, "if I recall, you used to call him 'Arse Face.'"

"On good days," admitted Sirius amicably, swiveling around to greet his friend. Lupin had put on clean clothes to replace the ones he had torn during the Change, and although he by no means could be described as looking well-rested and relaxed, he did appear much improved.

"You ready to go?" he asked Sirius.

Sirius nodded.

"And where are you two off to?" Narcissa interjected with asperity.

"Godric's Hollow," replied Sirius, getting to his feet. "Remus has a theory that the box my Key fits is somewhere in the Hollow. And I think he's got a point."

"Godric's Hollow?" Narcissa looked up at Sirius. "Isn't that...?"

"Yes," he said shortly, pulling on his long gray travelling cloak.

Sirius' tone discouraged inquiry, so instead Narcissa got to her feet, put her hands on Sirius' shoulders, and kissed him good-bye.

"Come back soon."

"Will do. Owl me if you find anything interesting in that book."

"I will," she said, and waved at him as he Disapparated, along with Lupin.

Narcissa stood for a moment, looking at the spot Sirius had vanished from. Lately he had begun to seem less like a fiance and more like an infrequent houseguest. She knew he had no choice, and

appreciated everything he was doing to help Draco; knowing he was worried about her son as well took some of the burden off her. Still, she missed him while he was away. Which, she had to admit, was a novel experience. She had never missed Lucius when he was gone. Sirius was a lot of things Lucius hadn't been - funny, warm, generous, and generally nonviolent.

And, of course, it didn't hurt that he was dead sexy.

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Harry sat on the floor of the cell with his arms behind him. He didn't have much choice in the matter - he couldn't see his bindings, but his hands were manacled behind him and fastened via a length of chain to an adamantine hoop sunk deep into the floor. He couldn't stand up, and couldn't move more than a foot away from the wall. It was not comfortable - he itched all over, his clothes were torn and stiff with blood. And his mind was spinning.

The cell looked just as it had before. The same clutter of awkward looking furniture, the same huge wardrobe. The guards who had dragged him in here had even tossed his sword into the corner of the room. He could vaguely see the glitter of the ruby-studded hilt from where he was sitting.

He heard Draco's voice in his head, amused, laughing. *"It's not enough just to know how to pick up a sword, Potter. You have to know which end to poke into the enemy."* And the same drawling voice, slightly different inflection. *"Do what you want with him. It doesn't matter to me."*

He shut his eyes, trying to block out of his mind the other things that voice had said. Things about his parents. The memory no longer made him angry, instead it opened up a black deep well of grief inside him that threatened to split his chest in half. He hadn't felt this bad about anything since...well, since he had thought he'd lost Hermione forever, lost her to Draco through his own stupidity and blindness. He remembered standing outside Hogwarts in the pelting rain, holding Hermione's stupid fat cat, which was

scratching and clawing at his chest, and seeing her and Draco running down the stairs. And hating them both. And had realized what the worst emotion that could ever be felt was: not sorrow or guilt or physical agony, but the pain of hating the person you loved most in the world.

He'd been wrong, though. He hadn't lost Hermione. Draco had, and he had loved her as much as Harry did. Or almost as much. And Harry knew, realizing this now, as he would have realized it before had he stopped to think about it, that if it had been him in Draco's place he would never have dealt with the loss of her with half the grace that the other boy had. Maybe pride wasn't always a flaw, when it gave you the strength to sacrifice what you loved.

A slight flicker of something akin to guilt flared and died under his ribs. He was still furious with Draco for what he had said about his parents. Much more furious with him for telling the truth than he would have been for some lie invented to make him angry. What gave him the right to conceal information like that? That he had met Harry's parents, talked to them? All right, not his real parents, only shadows of them, but still. Harry would have given anything just to see even the shadows of his parents as they had been when they were alive. There was a certain black irony in the fact that it had been Draco they talked to, but Harry was certainly in no mood to appreciate it.

Still there was a tiny nagging voice in the back of his head that said that Draco had only done what he had *had* to do. He hadn't looked particularly happy about doing it, either, in fact he had looked gutted. Much as Harry imagined he himself would look if he had to hurt Hermione, or Ron -

He jerked against his chains as his vision suddenly went black and the world peeled down the center like an orange. As if called up by his thoughts of them, he suddenly saw Ron, and Hermione as clearly as if they stood in front of him. He heard the screaming rattle of wind, saw that Hermione was gripping Ron's hand tightly and her eyes were searching, darting, looking - she seemed suddenly to see him; she wrenched her hand out of Ron's and screamed out his name, "*Harry!*"

The world closed itself back up. And Ron and Hermione were gone, vanished as if he had never seen them, and the only sound left in the room was his own ragged breathing and the rattle of the chains around his wrists. He blinked and shook his head hard. Tiny black diamonds of exhaustion flecked his vision, but otherwise he saw nothing unusual. The room was empty, as it had been moments ago. With something approaching a smile, he remembered Ron's voice telling him, *Hearing things that aren't there isn't a good sign, Harry, not even in the wizarding world.*

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*It took the guards only an instant to drag Harry out of the room. It might have taken longer if he had fought them. But he didn't fight them. He let them take him, and he looked back at the door, looked back towards Draco but Draco didn't notice and Harry didn't seem to see Fleur looking at him, either. She wasn't sure that she would have wanted to catch his eye, either. She had a feeling she knew how he would look at her. With hate in every curve of his face, as he had looked at Draco...*

*She turned back to Draco and to her Master, the man she was linked to, who drew power out of her with every breath he took like a spool winding silver thread. Slytherin stood with his Heir over the dead body of the mantichore. As she watched, he held out his hand and Draco allowed him to take the sword from his grasp. He raised it high overhead and brought it down, hard and swiftly, and it sliced through the mantichore's armored belly as easily as a knife slicing a loaf of bread.*

*Fleur felt a tinny ringing beginning in her ears. She was tired, so tired. Salazar and Draco began to waver in front of her as if she was looking at them through wavy glass. Slytherin drew his sword arm back and the mantichore's belly gaped open, blood pouring across the floor like a fountain and she saw Draco glance up and over at her as the blood ran towards her and then the world flipped upside down and the floor came at her, hard. And then there was*

*blackness.*

Fleur woke up slowly, swimming up out of unconsciousness towards light. She was lying on something soft, and by rolling sideways she realized it was a bed. Very slowly, she sat up, feeling prickling pains in her neck, back and shoulders as she did so.

She knew immediately where she was: the room she had slept in the night before, and the night before that, although the bed had been neatly made and she lay atop the covers, which were a heavy, velvety black material. Great swatches of the same dark material hung from the bedposts, and covered the windows, leaving the room lit only by the sputtering light of the torches that hung in metal brackets on the walls. Draco's silver and green sword stood propped against the wall. A tapestry that depicted a huge green serpent strangling a lion hung over the grate, in which a blazing fire billowed gold and red.

Sitting next to the fire, half-hidden in the depths of an enormous armchair, was Draco.

He had obviously had time to wash and clean himself up: his silver hair shone clean and bright and curled in damp tendrils against his temples, and he had washed the blood from his hands and face. He was very pale, his eyes dark and smudged underneath with blue shadows, but he looked composed. She remembered having seen him, that first time she had come to Hogwarts, sitting at the Slytherin table next to Viktor Krum. She hadn't told him when she had seen him again this summer that she remembered him, because he was so much changed as to be nearly unrecognizable. Not that he looked so very different but he simply was different, in some odd and inchoate way she couldn't quite define.

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Awake, are you? That was quite a dramatic faint you accomplished. Well done."

She sat up, hugging her arms to herself, and shivered. "What are you doing 'ere, Draco?"

"I was told this was my room."

"This is *my* room."

He grinned, a narrow grin like a knife blade. "Apparently we´re meant to share. Isn´t that sweet? I would have registered a complaint about the rooming situation, but I was too busy trying not to be killed by Dead Guy to get to it."

"Don´t call him that."

Draco swung a leg up over the arm of the chair and leaned back. The torchlight struck bright sparks off his silver hair. "I´ll call him what I like." He slid his eyes sideways, past her, and he grinned unpleasantly. "Isn´t that right?"

Fleur glanced where his gaze had gone, and saw, without surprise, one of the gray-robed servants of Slytherin standing in the corner of the room, silent, face hidden by his hood. They were always there, these servants, she had stopped noticing their presence.

Draco suddenly leaped out of his chair, a beautiful forward spring that took him to his feet and across the room within seconds. She had always admired how graceful he was, reminding her of some of her veela cousins who seemed to float rather than walking.

He approached the gray-robed servant, and cleared his throat.

The servant looked up at him, his face still hidden in thick shadow under the folds of the robe, and said nothing.

"What are you?" asked Draco, with catlike curiosity. He ducked his head, trying to see under the hood. "Vampire? Shapeshifter? Sad little pathetic werewolf?" It raised its head, and this time its hood slid back and Fleur caught an unpleasant glimpse of scaly white skin and large pinkish-red eyes. It was looking at Draco apprehensively. "Aha. Nasty creature, unknown origin. There seem to be a lot of you around these parts. Did you get Called here?" The creature was silent. "I implore you to share...no?" Draco took a few steps back, his look of consideration taking on a murderous edge. "Fine. Then get

out."

The servant didn't move.

"I said get out," said Draco haughtily, all his years of having house-elves dotting on his every whim rising up and spilling into his voice. "I'm the Heir of Slytherin, you know. I will command the armies of the Snake Lord. It might be wise to stay on my good side."

"Masster..." it began in a rather unappealing hissy voice.

"That's the spirit." Draco looked approving. "Now get out of here. Go run me an errand. Get me a Mai Tai."

The creature looked bewildered. "A Mai Tai?"

Draco nodded energetically. "A Mai Tai. With an umbrella. And don't come back until you've got one. I don't care if you have to go to London for it. I'm the Heir of Slytherin and my whims must be served." He reached out and jerked the door open, ushering the creature out with a wave of his free hand. It went slowly, looking very dubious. "That's right. Trot along now," said Draco, closing the door after its retreating back. Then he paused, and glanced back around the side of the door. "Don't forget the umbrella!" he howled. "*And make sure it's a green umbrella!*"

He slammed the door and turned back to Fleur. "Should I have ordered a drink for you? I could have, but you don't deserve it. Still, we're alone at last," and the look he gave her was unpleasantly speculative. "Aren't we?"

"You're never really alone, not here." Her heart was beating painfully fast. She took a deep breath, and it slowed slightly. "Draco.."

"What?" He was leaning against the doorframe, looking at her. His expression was not pleasant.

"Were you serious about being the commander of his armies?"

Draco shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest. "So he said, right



after you passed out, so I guess you don't remember. According to the prophecy, he and I are destined to rule the world together. I get to be a general with a neat little uniform. Otherwise known as Chief Guy In Charge of Executing People Slytherin Doesn't Like the Face Of. Although I hope he doesn't expect me to wear gray out of season."

"What else happened?" she said in a small voice. "After I fainted? He stabbed the manticore..."

"He cut it open," said Draco flatly. He unfolded his arms and went back to the armchair, throwing himself into it. "He cut it open and he took something out of its guts. And then he had his servants come and bring us back here. They carried you...wait a second," he added, his expression darkening, "shouldn't I be the one asking *you* questions? Am I supposed to believe that you don't know what's going on?" He shook his head, leaning back. "I don't owe you *any* information."

Slowly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and tested them. They seemed to hold her. She got to her feet and went over to Draco and knelt down by the side of his chair. He seemed startled by her sudden proximity, but he didn't move away. There was a sort of wary stillness about him, a murderous calm that might have unsettled her under other circumstances, but she was too frightened by their situation to feel it. "I didn't know!" The words spilled from her lips before she could stop them. It had suddenly become monumentally important to her that he know the truth. "I didn't know - he told me he wanted you two to kill the monster, that is all, he never said anything about further plans, he never talked about Harry--"

"I don't believe you," snarled Draco. "I bet he told you exactly what was going to happen--"

"No! I didn't--"

"And you dragged us through that maze and then you left us there with that manticore to *die*." His voice came out on an explosive hiss, his gray eyes blazing with fury.

"No--I didn't know what kind of monster was in there, I swear it."

"But you knew it was a monster, didn't you? And I'm sure you're telling the truth. Wait a minute, no you aren't. Because you're a lying bitch and you'd sell me for parts in Knockturn Alley if you could get enough Galleons for it."

Fleur resisted the urge to tell him that she suspected she'd get more Galleons for some of his parts than others.

Instead, she said, "It wasn't for me that I did what I did. It was for my little sister, for Gabrielle--"

"I don't want to hear any more of your lies," he snapped, cutting her off. "Give me useful information or get away from me. It's your choice."

Remotely, she wondered why she didn't want to slap his face. Was it because she was so tired, so tired she could barely stay upright? Or because she felt a need to do something, anything to expunge the memory of the look on Harry's face when the guards had surrounded him...

*Useful information?* She glanced up quickly at Draco. His face was thrown into shadow, the firelight glittering off the chain of the Epicyclical Charm so brightly that it seemed to burn at the hollow of his throat. "Draco, you must prepare yourself. He will come back for you soon, and then it will be...difficult."

"Difficult?"

"He will test you. Your strength. He will show you things...awful things, things you can't imagine."

"I can imagine some pretty bad things." Draco accomplished a one-shouldered shrug. "Come on, I've seen Severus Snape's pajamas. Nothing can terrify me."

Without thinking, she reached out and seized his wrist. "I'm serious."

"So am I." There was a feverish malicious amusement in his silver-black eyes as he looked at her. "Those pajamas, they had little hearts on them. It was horrible."

"These things are worse. They are so bad you could die from them."

Draco didn't reply for a moment. Then he leaned forward, so close she could feel his breath stirring her hair, and said evenly, "What do you care if I die?"

"I do care--"

"No you don't." His voice was calm, his eyes on her speculative. "I'm not usually wrong about people," he said. "I was wrong about you. I won't forgive you for that."

"I told you. This is not my fault."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Not your *fault*? Okay, one of us has been drinking and I'm sad to say it isn't me."

She reached out again, caught at his sleeve. "Let me explain, let me tell you why -my sister--"

He cast her hand away from him so violently that it smacked against the edge of the table, sending a shooting pain up her arm. "Don't touch me."

"I know you feel lied to -"

"Yes, well, that would be because you lied to me. Funny how these things work."

A sudden white blaze of anger lit inside her, and she could feel her breath coming short. Of course, that was happening often, these days. "You are a fine one to talk about lies," she snarled. "After I have just seen you turn your back on the only person in your life who was ever a friend to you."

Draco went white. She saw his hand go back and wondered for a moment if he was going to hit her, and resolved that if he did, she would hit him back. And then a voice cut through the buzzing of anger and exhaustion in her head, a voice that pinned them both in place, immobile as butterflies caught under glass.

"Children," said Salazar Slytherin from the doorway. "When you are done...fighting with each other, I require your attention."

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"Waiting for us?" Hermione echoed faintly, still staring.

The boy who looked like Harry nodded. "There's not much time. You'd better come with me right away."

"Not so fast," said Ron, trying to push Ginny and Hermione behind him. This was unsuccessful, since both of them resisted his efforts to be protective with indignant muttering noises. "Who are you? Why should we go anywhere with you?"

"Ron," interrupted Ginny, pushing at his arm. "Can't you see he looks just like Harry?"

"And that automatically makes him trustworthy? If he was a dead ringer for Professor Vector would you be following him home?"

The boy was looking at them as if they were mad. "*Who* do I look like?"

"A friend of ours," said Hermione, giving Ron's hand a warning rap with her knuckles. "Did you say you've been waiting here for us? How do you know who we are, and how did you know we would be here? And are you...you must be a Gryffindor. Aren't you?"

The boy's face tightened. "Godric Gryffindor was my father." He looked at the girls, and swept them a little bow. "My name is Benjamin."

Ginny looked impressed. "He bowed," she said, poking Hermione. "Guys never do that any more."

"I was raised to be polite to women," said Benjamin, glancing at them dubiously. "Even if they are dressed like Muggle men."

Ron was still looking at him suspiciously. "How do we know you are who you say you are?"

The boy sighed, and reached over his shoulder. He drew forth something that glimmered in the sharp sunlight - it was a long-bladed sword in a scabbard of marred, dark silver, engraved all over with brilliant designs of flowers and animals and leaves that flowed together intricately to form the word *Gryffindor*. The hilt of the sword was set with scarlet stones which formed the shape of a lion.

Ginny sucked in her breath, looking at the hilt. "Harry had that sword with him in the Chamber of Secrets. That's the sword of Gryffindor."

"Yes, it is," said Benjamin, and looked hard at her. "You're Helga's heir. You look like she must have when she was younger."

She nodded. "I'm Ginny."

"And you are the Heir of Ravenclaw," he went on, looking at Hermione. "She's been waiting for you." His gaze slid to Ron. "Are you...the Heir of Gryffindor? I didn't think you would be so..."

"Red-headed?" put in Ginny with a mischievous smile.

"I'm nobody's Heir," said Ron, looking long-suffering. "Just some git along for the ride, apparently."

Benjamin looked doubtful. Hermione put in quickly, "Did you mean it when you said we didn't have much time?"

"We don't." Benjamin's voice was short. "Rowena.." His voice trailed off. "You'll see when we get to her."

His voice was tight with unhappiness. He swept his red cloak around himself and set off without looking back. Pausing only to glance and shrug at the others, Hermione followed him, Ginny and Ron behind her.

Benjamin wended his way through the rubble as if it were a familiar landscape. Hermione scrambled to catch up and walk beside him. She was bursting with curiosity. "What happened here?"

He looked at her incredulously. Hermione couldn't repress a little shiver. It was bizarre to see such black eyes looking out of Harry's face. "The *war*," he said.

"Between who?" Hermione was fairly sure she knew the answer, but she wanted to hear him say it.

Skidding down a slope of tumbled rock and broken bits of stone, Benjamin shook his head. "The Snake Lord raised an army," he said. "He marched against the House of Wizards and against those who were once his friends...don't you know all this? Isn't it like a history lesson for you?"

"Humor me," said Hermione.

The boy shrugged. "All right. The Snake Lord created an army of goblins, shapeshifters, and hybrid half-man creatures. The whole wizarding world was drawn into the battle. On our side, we had the giants, unicorns and the dwarves -"

"What about the dragons?" demanded Ginny, catching up to them.

Benjamin snorted. "Dragons don't choose sides usually. They watch. They have funny senses of humor, dragons. But Slytherin had some kind of control over them." He paused and glanced around him at the wreckage. "This was Hufflepuff Castle," he said. "What wasn't burned to the ground by dragonfire was destroyed in the aftermath of the curse."

"What curse?" Hermione demanded. She couldn't help thinking of the curse that Sirius had been accused of performing, that had had smashed apart a street and killed twelve Muggles. How much

stronger this curse must have been.

"Rowena will explain that to you," said Benjamin as they came around a corner of broken wall and out into the sunlight and open spaces.

Hermione gasped. The landscape was barely recognizable as that which surrounded the Burrow and Ottery St. Catchpole. Open field stretched before them, as far as the eye could see, the blue sky arcing overhead. Dotted the field, in clusters and lines, were hundreds, possibly thousands of wizarding tents, both large and small, and all the colors of the rainbow. It was like the scene at the Quidditch World Cup, only a hundred times more so. Magical pennants snapped overhead in the brisk winter wind: she saw the scarlet of Gryffindor, the blue of Ravenclaw, the gold of Hufflepuff. The firefly spark of campfires glowed in between the tents, and she could see dozens of figures hurrying about, some clearly human, some clearly not.

"Blimey," exclaimed Ron from behind her, sounding impressed. "I've seen pictures of camps like these in textbooks, from the goblin rebellions. I never thought I'd see one in real life."

On the way to the camp, they passed over the remains of what had been a moat and would one day be the Weasleys' quarry. Stone steps led down into it, and a thin layer of dirty water covered the bottom. Hermione couldn't help staring as they crossed over it on a thin plank of wood. Somewhere down there lay incalculable treasure, not to mention the Time-Turner that would one day be Ginny's.

Close up, the camp made for an even more bizarre sight. Hermione, Ron and Ginny stuck close behind Benjamin as he wended his way through the tents, trying to ignore the odd looks they were getting. Hermione supposed they did look bizarre - she wished she had worn something other than jeans and a jumper, but then she didn't have any thousand-year-old wizarding robes lying around. Anyway, the denizens of the camp were none too ordinary-looking themselves. She began to wish she hadn't dropped Care of Magical Creatures after fifth year - there were all sorts of beasts and beast-people

rushing to and fro, some which she recognized and some which she just wished she did. There were centaurs trotting purposefully and looking stern, pointy-eared, haughty women in long silky dresses who could only be elves, and a number of very short, very hairy, angry-looking creatures who sat around one of the campfires clanging brass tankards together and singing in off-key voices.

Benjamin paused, and with a muttered "Wait here," to Hermione and the others, ducked into a small blue tent.

Ron reached over and rubbed Hermione's arms. "You look cold."

"I am cold. It's freezing. And those little singing men are making me nervous."

"Dwarves," muttered Ron, into Hermione's ear. "Read about them in history class. Mean little buggers but good fighters. Get them drunk, they'll run around axing everyone's legs off at the knee."

"They're awfully hairy," put in Ginny, looking at the dwarves suspiciously.

"And gender does seem to be optional," observed Ron. As if they had heard him, the dwarves glanced over and glared at the three of them out of many pairs of little red eyes. A moment later, they had gone back to singing more loudly and raucously than before.

*The chimneys were dirty at Mrs. McFry's*

*And I'll grant they were worse down at Molly O'Clue's*

*But the chimney sweep said, with a gleam in his eye*

*"I've got a great tool here for cleaning the fluuuuuuues!"*

*For I may be a tiny chimney sweep*

*With a tiny grimy face*



*But I'm carrying a broom that makes strong girls weep*

*Won't you let me up, up, up your fireplace? \**

Benjamin poked his head out of the tent. "She said she wants to see the Heirs," he said, looking at Hermione and Ginny. "Just the Heirs." He looked at Ron. "You´ll have to wait here."

"No." Hermione shook her head before Ron managed to say anything. "We won´t go in without Ron."

Benjamin looked as if he didn´t believe he had heard her correctly. "You won´t what?"

"We won´t go in without Ron," Hermione repeated. "Can´t you tell her that?"

Benjamin stepped out of the tent, drawing the flap shut behind him. "I don´t think you understand," he said, his voice sharp with anger. "She´s *dying*. She´s the greatest witch of our age, and she´s dying. She gave everything she had in defeating the Snake Lord and it killed her. She´s only kept herself alive this long because she wanted to see you. She was waiting for you. She´s been like a mother to me my whole life and these past two days I´ve had to watch her suffer and wait for you, so I´m sorry if it seemed like I don´t like you, but as far as I´m concerned you´re the only reason she´s still here and in pain, and-"

"*Benjamin!*" Hermione interrupted, shocked. "I´m *sorry*. We didn´t know."

He nodded, obviously ashamed of his outburst.

Hermione exchanged a quick glance with Ron and Ginny, who were both as obviously taken aback as she was. Not to mention that it was difficult to watch someone who looked so much like Harry be angry and unhappy, even if they did know that it wasn´t him.

"I´ll wait outside," said Ron quietly. "It´s fine."

Benjamin nodded. The unhappy look around his eyes eased slightly. "I'll wait with you." He turned back to the tent, and pulled the flap back open for Hermione and Ginny. Ginny hesitated a moment, then ducked through; Hermione paused at the entrance, and looked back at Ron. He returned her anxious glance, blue eyes bright under his sooty hair, and winked.

She bit her lip. "Ron, be careful. Don't go anywhere. And don't get in a fight with the dwarves. And -"

"And don't eat too much chocolate or I'll get sick. I'm not going to fight with the dwarves, Hermione. Get along with you."

"It's just that they look like they've been doing kind of a lot of...you know," said Hermione, miming the gesture of someone picking up a tankard and downing it.

"Thumb-sucking?" hazarded Ron, looking at her curiously.

"*Drinking*," hissed Hermione in exasperation.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not the one who needs to brush up on her finger pantomime."

Hermione threw up her hands and glanced over at Benjamin. "Look after him," she said, ignoring Ron's glare and quite conscious of how silly it looked, telling a twelve-year old to look after a boy four years older. But she didn't care. With a last quelling glance at the both of them, she ducked into the blue tent after Ginny.

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Because the wards around Lily and James' old house prevented Apparating within a half-mile radius, Lupin and Sirius Apparated into Godric's Hollow High Street instead. Godric's Hollow was a small, inoffensive little wizarding town just on the Welsh side of the border with England. "It's green, Remus, really green," Lupin remembered James having told him at school, and he had at first thought that James meant that the lush Welsh land around his hometown was green. But no, he had meant the town itself, which was indeed green - the shop fronts along the High Street were

painted in shades ranging from emerald to lime, picked out with accents of blue, white and gold. A scarlet Welsh flag snapped in the stiff breeze overhead, its gold dragons fluttering above the words *Y Ddraig Goch Ddyry Cychwyn*.

Narrow little cobblestone streets wound through the shops and houses. In the distance, Lupin could see the rise of the hills behind the town, dark green and gray. Though it had been clear at the Manor, it was cloudy here; the sky was slate-colored and lowering. Lupin shivered and pulled the collar of his travelling cloak up around his ears.

If any of the inhabitants of Godric's Hollow had noticed the two wizards who had suddenly Apparated into their midst, they didn't show it. Nobody looked at Sirius or Lupin as they wended their way down the street that led out of town, past a candy shop with a display of Scrum! Chocolates in the window, (a glowering photograph of Viktor Krum loomed over the pile of gaily wrapped sweets. "Scrum! The new brand of candies personally endorsed by the famous Bulgarian Seeker.") and a pub called The Slug and Lettuce.

"James and I used to play darts there," said Sirius, as they passed under the sign, which seemed to be made out of a real leaf of lettuce, and out of which a small glowing slug was taking contented bites. "It was the only game I was better at than him."

"You might have been decent at Quidditch if they'd let you play on the motorcycle," Lupin grinned. "What happened to your bike, anyway?"

"Hagrid had it for a while. He gave it back to me after the acquittal, but I haven't had the heart to use it. The last place I ever flew on it was...well, here, and - anyway, I've got Buckbeak now."

"So where is it?"

"I had it stored in my vault at Gringott's. Why? You want to borrow it?"

"Not really my favored mode of transport, but thank you."

"It's a girl magnet, that bike."

"That's nice."

"Which reminds me. Are you bringing anyone to the wedding? Because Narcissa has this friend who doesn't have anyone to go with, and I thought you might be willing to do us a favor and be her escort. She used to be an Auror and she really likes dogs, so the wolf thing probably won't be a problem..."

Lupin paused in the middle of the street and looked at his friend with deep suspicion. "Are you trying to set me up, Sirius?"

"What? No," said Sirius, looking indescribably shifty. "Never..."

"*Sirius...*"

Sirius abandoned all effort at pretense. "Oh, come on, Moony. You need to get out more. Meet someone. I always thought *I* would be the last bachelor, but you...well, aren't you bored?"

Lupin growled. "For your information, I lead a rich and varied social life."

"Oh, I know. Every night it's Wizard Jeopardy followed by reading all your back issues of *Arithmancer's Weekly*, and a cup of hot cocoa..."

"I *am* a werewolf, Sirius."

"And I'm a Gemini. We all have our cross to bear."

"You just want me in the same boat with you, oh About-To-Get-Married One. Which is going to happen when, anyway?"

"Narcissa had it scheduled for the fifteenth of August."

"What do you mean, the fifteenth of August?"

"What I said. The fifteenth of August. Is that a problem?" Sirius turned and smiled at his friend, pushing back the dark hair the wind had whipped across his eyes. "Have you got plans? Or is it..." Sirius' voice suddenly trailed off, his eyes widening. "It's not..."

"The full moon," said Lupin flatly. "I can't believe you scheduled your wedding for the full moon."

"*Moony*," exclaimed Sirius, stopping dead in his tracks in the middle of the road that led away from the High Street and up the hill towards the Potters' house. He looked like couldn't decide whether to laugh or look abashed. "I stopped keeping track of full moons after Hogwarts...you can still go to the wedding you know..."

"No," interrupted Lupin self-righteously, starting to walk again. Sirius scurried after him. "I think I'll stay home and, oh, *not* eat the wedding party."

"I meant we would change the date." Sirius sounded aggrieved. "It's not like there's a wedding without you, I mean you're meant to be the best man. Moony, don't sulk."

"I'm not sulking."

"You are."

"I'm not."

"You are. I can tell."

"Maybe," conceded Lupin, stopping dead in his tracks and turning, his hands in his pockets. "But it took your mind off where we were going, didn't it? We're here, by the way."

Sirius stopped too, all his nervous motion suddenly quelled into stillness as he looked past his friend's shoulder at the ruins just over the rise of the hill.

It had been burned to the foundations the last time Lupin had seen it and it had never been built back up. He doubted it could be seen by those who didn't already know it was there. It would look simply like a ruined or overgrown patch of ground: unpleasant and inhospitable. That was the way this kind of magic worked.

They went forward, Sirius first, and Lupin behind him, watching Sirius' shoulders stiffen as he took in the sight out of the ruined house - really just a grid of stones now, running along the earth, showing where the walls had been, the stone front steps, the door where he had last seen James and Lily standing, waving goodbye...

The cold wind picked up and whipped Lupin's hair into his eyes. He brushed it back, shivering, and raised the hood of his travelling cloak. He looked sideways at Sirius.

Sirius was staring at the house, well, not quite at it, but past it, towards the rising gray hills in the distance. The look of controlled disquiet was gone from his face and his eyes were filled with memory and pain.

"Sirius...you all right?"

"I'm fine." Sirius pulled his cloak tighter around him, and started off towards the house. Lupin followed, curiosity tempered with concern for Sirius. This, he knew, would be harder on his friend than it was on him. He knew James' house from the years after Lily and James were married, but Sirius knew it from summer holidays spent there in between Hogwarts terms; when Sirius had nowhere else to go, the Potters took him in. He had told Lupin once, not that long ago, that he had been glad that James' parents had died when he was twenty, that they had never lived to believe that he, Sirius Black, who they had treated as a son, had betrayed their every act of kindness in the worst of all possible ways.

They were standing now in what had been the Potters' back yard. It was not as overgrown as one might have expected: the spell that kept the house hidden had the side effect of keeping the property in a partial kind of stasis. The grass was long, reaching nearly to Lupin's knees as he trudged after Sirius, who was heading with

some purpose towards a corner of the yard. He stopped at the base of a very tall evergreen tree, and stared at it.

Lupin came up behind him, shuffling his feet through the grass. The wind made a whispering sound through the leaves. He looked at the tree, which was quite ordinary-looking, although obviously hollow: there was a dark hole in the trunk about half a foot over his head. "It's a tree, Sirius."

"I know that."

"Does this tree have meaning for you, or is this just some kind of burgeoning interest in horticulture in general?"

In answer, Sirius took out his wand and pointed it at the opening in the trunk of the tree. "*Accio*," he said, and, like birds flying out of a dovecote, objects began hurtling out of the tree - small, irregularly shaped objects. Lupin ducked as a small box whizzed by his right ear, and turned to look inquiringly at Sirius.

"What the...?"

Sirius stood looking thoughtful as the last object flew towards him, and he caught it in his hand. "James and I used to use this tree as a sort of...treasure chest. To keep things that we didn't want his parents to see. He once told me that this tree has been here for hundreds of years, and generations of Potters have used it as a hiding place. I thought..." his voice trailed off as he knelt down in the grass, and Lupin knelt down with him, to examine the pile that had collected at his feet.

Some of the objects were familiar. Lupin recognized, with a pang, the box of Zonko's Magical Reality Pencils "Make your sketches come to life!" that had been used to draw the Marauder's Map. A stack of letters. He hadn't seen them before, but he recognized Lily's handwriting. Sirius brushed a hand over those, and set them aside. A bag of Bertie Botts' Every Flavor Beans emblazoned with rainbows. "Flower Power Flavors!" said the side of the bag. Sirius picked that up and grinned. "I remember these. You weren't supposed to eat the purple ones because they were hallucinogenic,

of course that was just a rumor..."

"Yes, and you and James tested the rumor by sneaking three of the purple ones into Snape's oatmeal at breakfast. That was the day he nearly drowned in the lake because he thought it was a magical gateway to the Land of the Candy People."

"Yeah, that was pretty funny," Sirius grinned. Then quickly sobered. "No it wasn't. It was very insensitive of us."

Lupin looked at him in disbelief. "Sirius, did you sneak a purple bean while I wasn't looking?"

Sirius grinned again and threw the beans aside. He picked up a wooden box and flipped back the lid. Lupin looked inside, and felt his heart skip a beat. A yellow-bound book. *So You Want To Be A Wolverine: How To Become an Animagus in Twelve Difficult Steps*. Stacks of parchment notecards, written all over in James' careful, boyish handwriting. *Ingredients We Will Need: powdered snakeskin, dragon's blood, shredded boomslang skin, spine of newt...Note: ask Lily for key to Charms classroom so we can work in there...should be almost complete with the process by next full moon...*

And Lupin had to shut his eyes because of the clarity of the image of James that flared up like lightning against his inner lids; James standing in the Forbidden Forest, waiting to change, face raised to the night sky, eyes full of wilderness and stars. Time compressed like an accordion, and he heard James laughing - Sirius had always laughed the longest, but James was the one who laughed first; he was, unlike Sirius, always ready to be happy, to be pleased. Lupin had always thought that that was because of the difference between Sirius' childhood and James' but then Harry, Harry with his awful childhood and his years spent locked under the stairs, still managed to be like James in that respect: he did not need much beyond his friends to make him happy. Whereas Draco was more like Sirius, in that it was hard to tell if *happy* was a word that could ever be appropriately applied to either one of them.

He heard Sirius clear his throat, shut the box, and lay it down at



their feet. Lupin glanced around - there was another stack of letters, which, judging from the fact that most of them were decorated with little sparkling hearts and shooting stars and seemed to be from people named Ashley, Carole and Amy, were doubtless from Sirius' old girlfriends, and which Sirius hastily pushed aside. There was a stack of old Quidditch cards, including a Ludo Bagman who grinned and winked cheerily, and an Ivan Wronski which doubtless would be worth a sizeable amount of Galleons these days. Sirius set these aside. Lastly, there was a stack of wizard photographs held together with a ribbon that Sirius slid into a pocket. Finally, he sat back on his heels, dusting off his hands, and shook his head.

"Not what you wanted?" asked Lupin, raising his eyebrows.

"No," said Sirius slowly, "no, there was this box, James was telling me about. I could have sworn...." He suddenly hopped to his feet, snapping his fingers. "Of course," he exclaimed. "It's buried under the roots. Stand back a second, Moony."

With misgivings, Lupin did so.

Sirius retrieved his wand from a pocket. "*Accio* shovel!" he intoned.

Lupin's eyes popped open. "A shovel? From *where*, Sirius?"

"Wherever's nearest," deadpanned Sirius. "Oh, and *duck*," and Lupin ducked as a good-sized shovel whistled over his head and landed in Sirius' grasp. Lupin crossed his arms and watched in mingled exasperation and amusement as Sirius rolled up the sleeves of his robes and attacked the base of the tree with the shovel. He didn't even want to think about what the good citizens of Godric's Hollow might think about a flying shovel winging overhead.

Since Sirius' manner discouraged assistance, Lupin sat down on a tree stump and watched as his friend hacked at the very hard ground with the edge of the shovel. Eventually Sirius stripped off his wizarding robes and threw them on the ground, and then his sweater followed. Lupin considered offering a hand, but then thought better of it. Instead, he took a bar of Scrum! Chocolate out of his pocket and began to nibble on it in a resigned fashion. They

were obviously going to be there a good long time.

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Draco lowered his hand slowly and turned to look at Slytherin.

The Snake Lord stood in the doorway, and Draco could tell by the dark red border of blood at the bottom of his robes that he had not yet changed his clothes. His eyes were alight, feverish, and two spots of color burned high on his cheeks. He looked neither very alive nor any longer did he look dead, but somehow in between, reflexively animate.

Draco heard Fleur get to her feet beside him. The heavy sweet scent that clung about her hair and clothes seemed stronger, maybe from proximity to the fire. It made him a little dizzy.

"Master," said Fleur, and inclined her head.

Draco didn't move. Slytherin took a few more steps forward, until he stood in the center of the room. "Boy," he said to Draco. "You won't greet me?"

"I won't call you Master," said Draco evenly.

Slytherin seemed unruffled. "I would not expect you to."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Soon enough," said Slytherin, "you will call me Father."

"Yeah, you know that word doesn't really have very good associations for me. Maybe I could call you something else? Like...Nigel? Something friendly."

Slytherin smiled. "After this evening, you may feel differently. Do you know what I have planned?"

"I was hoping for a night at the opera, dinner, maybe some flowers, then we take a walk under the stars...you make a move, I tell you I'm

not that kind of guy..."

"I do not understand your sense of humor," said Slytherin.

"I had a feeling you were going to say that." Draco fought an insane urge to snicker. "I've got an idea. We could get sushi and not pay."

Beside Draco, Fleur gave a frightened little squeak.

Slytherin smiled again. It was the same mirthless smile with no humor in it, a sort of reflexive muscle spasm rather than any expression of actual pleasure. "Come with me," he demanded, "both of you," and he walked out of the room.

Fleur dashed after him.

Draco followed more slowly.

They went through a series of narrow hallways and eventually emerged into a much larger room, almost circular in shape, the walls cut from the same rough stone as the rest of the castle. The room was nearly empty save for a large circle chalked into the stone floor, and a set of intricately designed tall screens against the far wall. They looked to be carved out of dragonbone, for they were whiter than ivory, and the intricate designs which adorned them were set with chips of jade, silver and malachite. They were beautiful, and Draco immediately wondered what they were hiding.

This made him glance sideways at Fleur. She was pale and looked as if she might faint.

Slytherin walked forward into the center of the room, until he stood in the very center of the chalked circle. Then he held out his left hand to Draco.

"Come here," he said.

Very reluctantly, Draco followed him. He felt a shudder rip through him as he crossed the chalk line to stand in the circle with Salazar Slytherin. The air inside the circle seemed a good ten degrees colder

than the air in the rest of the room. Draco found himself shivering, the chill seeming to come from somewhere deep inside.

"Now," said the Snake Lord. "Would you prefer to suffer standing up, or kneeling down?"

Draco blinked, not wanting to believe that he had heard correctly. "Suffer?"

"It's your choice. I believe in nothing if not free will," said Slytherin, his voice dry and cool as snakeskin. His hand suddenly whipped out with the speed of a striking cobra, and seized the front of Draco's robes. "Do you think I trust you?" he demanded, pushing his face close to Draco's, black eyes staring into silver. "Your little charade earlier today notwithstanding, you have done nothing but fight me since the day I rose. Do not think I don't know you. I have taken your measure, seen your dreams, I know what you are capable of, and incapable of. Why do you think I let you go the first time we met? You were too strong then, you would have fought me too hard. Now you are weaker. The sword has drained you of your magic as surely as your battle with the mantichore drained you of strength and that wound in your side drained you of blood. If I choose to make the charade truth now, you cannot stop me."

Draco's voice scraped his throat. "What makes you think it was a charade?"

Slytherin released his grip on Draco's robes. "What makes you think it matters?" he said, almost gently, and placed his hands on either side of Draco's face. Barbs ran through Draco's nerves where the cold fingers touched him, tracing the line of his cheekbones just under his eyes. "In your own way," said the Snake Lord, "you're rather innocent."

"Oh, no." Draco's voice was hard. "That's one thing I'm not."

"Really?" Slytherin dropped his hands from Draco's face. "What have you done? What has been done to *you*?"

"Everything."

Slytherin shook his head. "No. Not everything." He held out a hand. "Now give me your hand. Your *left* hand."

Numbly, Draco gave it to him. He felt as if he had left his body and was floating somewhere overhead, looking down at the circle and the two people standing in it.

"I'll ask you again," said the Snake Lord. "Would you prefer to suffer standing, or kneeling?"

There was a silence. Finally, Draco said, "Standing."

"I thought you would say that," said Slytherin, and turned Draco's hand palm-up, pushing his sleeve up to his elbow as he did so, exposing the unmarked skin of his forearm, traced with tiny blue veins.

"*Potestatem patris nostrae in tenebris invoco*," hissed Slytherin, sounding almost like Harry speaking Parseltongue, and suddenly the chalk circle flared into flames, a ring of fire burning around them. Slytherin grinned, and this time there was mirth in his smile, and a light in his eyes, although that could just have been the reflection of the fire. "*Bruciatura!*" he cried.

A white blade of pain shot through Draco as if Slytherin had driven a knife into his arm. He cried out, and much as he had wanted to stand, he found he couldn't - his knees went as if his legs had been kicked out from under him, and he hit the floor with his hands, Slytherin releasing his grip. He writhed and curled in on himself, conscious for those moments only of the pain that speared through his arm, raced up his veins, threatened to stop his heart. Bright white agonies burst behind his eyes: stars, constellations, exploding galaxies, painted silver on his inner lids.

It stopped.

Draco lay still, his eyes closed, waiting. When the pain did not return, he opened his eyes and sat up slowly, aching all over, his arm burning as if it had been held in a fire. He turned it palm up,

knowing already what he would see, burned black and raw into the skin of his forearm. The skull with its grinning jaws, the snake, the same empty eye sockets mocking him now as they had mocked him from their place on his father's arm. *Signo serpens*.

The Dark Mark.

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The inside of the blue tent, like the inside of many wizarding tents, was completely unlike the exterior. Hermione and Ginny found themselves in a beautifully appointed bedchamber with walls of stone. A fireplace, sunk into the north wall and surrounded by much carved stone, smoked and spat with red-gold fire. Tapestries and metal-bound chests all about caught the firelight and flared and faded in harmony. At the end of the room was a heavy-looking bed, curtains drawn back, and on the bed a woman lying amid the pillows. She was only a darkly outlined shadow as Hermione turned her face away from the fire, although she seemed to be moving, and sitting up. She spoke, then, out of the shadows.

"Come closer," she said.

Hermione took Ginny's hand and together they went towards the bed. As they approached, the shadows melted into clarity and Hermione was able to see the woman in the bed more clearly. She sat up against stacked pillows, wrapped in robes that somehow, rather wildly, reminded Hermione of the color she had chosen for her own set of dress robes: pale, periwinkle blue. She had the tumbled brown hair and peach-pale skin of her tapestried self back at Slytherin's castle, only without the ink stains on her cheek. She looked deathly tired as she leaned forward and reached out her hands towards the girls. "So there is another of me in the world now," she said, gently, and lightly touched the edge of Hermione's hair. Her eyes darkened with sadness as they moved to Ginny. "And another of Helga. Just as pretty as she was."

Hermione and Ginny were both speechless. Rowena seemed to understand this. "Please sit down," she said, and gestured them towards a low bench at the side of the bed, stacked with the same

soft-looking pillows.

They sat. Hermione had been afraid, when Benjamin had said that Rowena was dying, that they would be ushered in to see a woman who was terribly wounded, or delirious, but Rowena only seemed very, very tired, her skin so pale Hermione thought she could see through it to the blood beneath.

"You look cold," said Rowena, glancing from Ginny to Hermione.

Hermione nodded. "It was summer where we were. *When* we were," she corrected herself.

Rowena smiled tiredly at her, reached out, and touched the Lycanthe on its chain around Hermione's throat. "I had been terrified this was destroyed," she said. "When Salazar went, he was holding it in his hand. It vanished along with him. I'm glad it found its way to you. Can I use it for a moment?"

"Of course. It's yours," said Hermione, and drew the chain over her head, handing to the older woman without the usual pang that accompanied giving it up even for a moment.

Holding it lightly in her left hand, Rowena extended her other hand towards the girls. "*Pectogarmentius!*" she said.

A slight tingling sensation ran over Hermione, followed by a feeling of surprising warmth. Glancing down, she saw that her light jeans and jumper had metamorphosed into long robes of soft, dark blue wool over a wool dress. She glanced over at a surprised Ginny, who was now wearing similar clothes of dark green. Hermione was impressed. She had thought about using a warmth spell on their clothes earlier, but changing the substance and appearance of things at the same time was advanced Transfiguration and she wasn't sure she could have managed that.

"Thank you," said Rowena, as if Hermione had been the one to do her a favor, and handed back the Lycanthe.

Hermione looked from the silver Lycanthe to the older witch.

"You´re a Magid," she said. "You don´t need this."

"But I´m dying," said Rowena, softly. "I expect Benjamin told you. I haven´t got much strength left. No - it´s all right. I wanted to do a little magic. I´ve missed it these past few days. And don´t worry. The centaurs have made me a potion that will keep me alive as long as necessary to talk to you."

Hermione cleared her throat, but her voice still came out squeaky. "Benjamin," she said. "He´s the first Heir of Gryffindor?"

Rowena nodded. "I can see by your expression that you recognized him. Is he as like to the Heir in your own time as he is to his father?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "He´s very like Harry."

Rowena blinked. "Henry? Like the King?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not short for anything. Just Harry. He looks a bit like Godric. But he´s a Magid. Like you."

"I would have thought he would have come with you," said Rowena. "If you are here, that must mean Salazar has risen again. Where is Harry?"

*Isn´t that just what I wish I knew,* Hermione thought miserably. Her throat seemed to have closed up. Ginny reached over and squeezed her hand.

"Slytherin took him," she said finally. "We don´t know where..."

"He *took* him? Took Godric´s Heir?" Rowena had paled even further, if that was possible. "Taken him where? And how?"

Hermione related very quickly the story of her own experience being kidnapped by Slytherin, and then their encounter with him at the Burrow. When she was done, Rowena exhaled softly.

"He must have found a Source," she said, turning to Hermione.



"When you first met him, he was weak. He had only just risen. He had no source of power. He must have found a Magid willing to be a Source for him."

"So he's strong again?" asked Ginny.

"Only temporarily," said Rowena. "A Source is meant to be used as an amplifier of power, a focusing device. A Source is not to be relied upon to provide the magic a wizard lacks. Such a connection would drain the Source and kill them slowly. He will need another Source soon, and another, and another."

"Is that why he wants Harry?" Hermione demanded numbly.

"No. He would not waste the Heir of Gryffindor like that and besides, a Source must be willing. He knows it cannot last - he is propping up his powers for as long as he needs to find the Orb."

Ginny looked as bewildered as Hermione felt. "The Orb?"

"I stripped Slytherin of his powers before I imprisoned him," said Rowena, a little breathless. "Because of the sword, he could not be killed. So I did the next best thing; I imprisoned him in stasis, hid his body away in his castle which is likewise hidden from all save those who already know it is there. His powers I drained into an Orb, and because I could not destroy it I hid it away where it would be protected by the fiercest monster Salazar himself had ever created, so if he were to rise again, he would be weak and powerless. Unless," she added, "he can get the Orb back. It cannot be smashed or destroyed, but it can be opened. Should he succeed in doing that..." She shook her head. "But he could not kill the mantichore. Not weakened as he is. It is far too deadly."

Hermione suddenly flashed back to the creature engraved on the box that had held Ginny's Time-Turner. "A mantichore?"

Rowena nodded. "It is hidden *inside* the mantichore, which is itself immortal and impervious to most types of magical harm. It would have to be killed for someone to retrieve the Orb from it."

"But if he did," said Hermione. "If he *did* kill the mantichore, and if he had the Orb - then what?"

"The Orb can only be opened in the presence of all four Heirs. Each must touch it, and speak an Opening Charm, and they must do so by choice. Words spoken under the Imperius Curse would be ineffective."

"Does Slytherin know that?"

"No. But he is clever. He knows me, as well. He heard the Charm I spoke that imprisoned him in the first place. Given time, he could work it out."

"So he won't hurt Harry," said Hermione, her shoulders sagging in relief. "He can't - he still needs him."

Rowena looked at her, and Hermione realized who her blue eyes reminded her of. Dumbledore. They were so steady and calm, so piercing. "You love him," she said.

"Yes," said Hermione, feeling unable to lie. "More than anything else in the world."

"What about Salazar's Heir?" Rowena said softly. "What of him?"

For a moment Hermione thought Rowena was asking if she loved Draco as well, and she simply stared. It was Ginny who answered. "There in an Heir of Slytherin, if that's what you mean."

"And has he joined with Salazar?"

"No. He was kidnapped, along with Harry, otherwise he would be with us. He wouldn't join with Slytherin, though. He just wouldn't."

"Perhaps he has not joined with him yet," said Rowena gently. "But that is what the prophecy has said will happen. It was foretold. I'm sorry, if he's a friend of yours."

Ginny shook her head in denial.

Hermione agreed, "Draco wouldn't do that."

Rowena flinched. "Is *that* his name?"

Hermione was taken aback. "Yes," she said slowly. "Draco Malfoy."

"*Malfoy*," echoed the woman in the bed. "That sounds like Salazar's idea of a joke, that name. *Mal fait*, a bad deed. And creating an Heir was the worst of his." Rowena was looking off towards the window. "I wish I could believe in his goodness, for your sakes." She turned to Hermione. "But you love him. Don't you?"

Hermione goggled, and said nothing. Beside her, Ginny tensed slightly.

"Love is a blinding force," said Rowena. "If he is truly Salazar's Heir, then in his blood runs dark wizardry. By the time Salazar created the veela who bore his children, he was so far gone into the Dark Arts that when he was cut, he bled not blood but fire. And I knew this and still I did not believe he would hurt me until it was too late." She raised her eyes to Hermione and Ginny. "It is possible to be so mistaken in someone you have loved that you think you can never trust yourself again. I hope, for your sakes, that that will not happen. Could you kill him, if it came to that?"

Hermione felt the shocked blood surge through her veins. "Kill Draco?" She closed her eyes, pictured him against her inner lids, smiling as he did only at her, his gray eyes darkening into slate, mouth curling up at the corners. She couldn't imagine killing anyone, much less a friend, much less Draco. It was a ridiculous impossibility. "Of course not."

Ginny's whole body was vibrating with tension beside her. "None of us could hurt him. None of us would. We want to know how to stop *Slytherin*, not Draco. He's not like that. I've seen him do good things, heroic things. He's saved Harry's life, and Hermione's. He might have dark wizardry in his blood, but in the end it's his choice, isn't it?"

"Salazar has a way," said Rowena, "of not leaving much of any choice. What matters to him - to Draco? What's the most important thing in the world to him?" she asked Hermione.

Hermione almost smiled. "Besides himself?" She thought for a moment. "Harry." Tears suddenly prickled the backs of her eyelids. Resolutely, she stared them away. In a halting voice, she said, "I have to tell you something. When we used the Turner, when we were in-between Time, I thought I saw him, saw Harry. Just for a second. He was in a blue room, his arms were chained behind his back. It wasn't any place I've ever seen before."

*And I didn't see Draco with him,* she thought, but pushed the thought down. *Be quiet. It means nothing.*

"I know where he must be," said Rowena, sitting up. "If he is a Magid, there is one prison on this earth that could hold him. Salazar built it himself. He meant to keep *me* in it. And adamantine, in great enough quantities, is blue." She bit her lip, looking distracted.

Hermione's head was spinning. "Harry is in an adamantine cell? Doesn't that mean it would be impossible to get to him?"

"I could tell you how to get into the cell now," said Rowena thoughtfully. "In the future, though...Salazar may have changed the wards."

"Well, if I go there now, and use the Time-Turner," said Hermione eagerly, "it should bring us forward in time...to Harry."

She sat back. "Touch it and say *mobiliarus*, and it will act as a Portkey which will bring you to his castle. Take Benjamin with you. He can let you into the cell, and Portkey back- "

There was a rustle at the tent flap. Benjamin poked his head in. "Did you call for me?"

"Eavesdropping, Ben?" Rowena smiled. Then her smile faded

slightly. "Is there someone with you?"

"Well, yes but I wasn't going to -"

"No." Rowena straightened up. "Let him come in."

With a puzzled glance, Ben stepped into the tent and held the flap open for Ron to follow him. It looked as if it had started snowing, there were little white flakes caught in Ron's scarlet hair. He looked curiously around the inside of the tent, taking in the elaborate furnishings and the collection of weaponry hanging on the wall.

"Come here," said Rowena to him, and held out a hand.

Looking even more curious, he obeyed. Hermione watched as he crossed the room to the bed, his hands shoved in his pockets, eyebrows raised.

"You're a Diviner," said Rowena, without preamble, looking closely at him. "A seventh son."

Ron jerked his hands out of his pockets in astonishment. "A what?"

"A Diviner. Are they not common in your time?"

Hermione felt her mouth drop open. "But Ron *hates* Divination!"

"He must not have had the proper teaching, then," said Rowena serenely.

"Ain't that the truth," grinned Ron, who looked surprised, but not altogether displeased to have been credited with an unexpected talent.

"Let me look at you," said Rowena, and Ron took another step closer to her. Suddenly, she reached up, drew his head down and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Be very careful," she said. "Swear that you will."

Looking very alarmed, Ron straightened up. "I, uh, I will. I promise."

Rowena nodded. "Thank you." She sat back against the pillows. "You can go now."

Ron nodded uneasily. "Right. I ... should go."

He backed up, nearly stumbling into Benjamin, who took his arm and steered him out of the tent, while Ron stared back over his shoulder until the tent flap closed behind them.

Ginny had a puzzled expression on her face. "Why should he be careful? Is he in danger?"

"Being a seventh son and a diviner is a gift, and like all gifts, it is a double-edged blade. It seems he has not been trained at all, but with some training, he could be powerful. And power attracts danger."

"Don't we know it," said Ginny, with conviction.

Rowena closed her eyes as if exhausted.

"We should go," said Hermione gently. She got to her feet, and impulsively leaned forward to take Rowena's hand. "Is there anything you want to ask us, anything about the future?"

Rowena shook her head. "It is best if I don't know, I think." She smiled gently at them. "The future cannot be too bad, can it, if it produced you two, and your Diviner friend. And your Harry."

"And Draco," said Ginny staunchly.

"And him too," said Rowena with the same gentleness. She looked towards the window. "You had better go."

Ginny reached forward and squeezed Rowena's hand, looking as if she might cry. Then she turned and fled.

Hermione glanced after Ginny and hesitated. There was something pressing on her mind. "Rowena..." she began.

"Yes?"

"In the past...I mean, your past...did Helga and Salazar...did they...did they ever..." Her voice trailed off. Feeling very stupid, she knew her ears were turning pink. "*You* know."

Rowena's blue eyes sparkled through her tiredness. She leaned forward, and in a conspiratorial whisper, said, "You know, I always wondered that myself. We all grew up together, and Helga ... Helga was very pretty, and she always healed him when he got into scrapes...I always suspected there was something, but I never had any proof. I'll tell you one thing, though," and for the first time, Rowena actually grinned. "She was the only person in the world who could ever tell him what to do."

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A little, hopeless sobbing sound broke the silence. For a horrified moment, Draco thought it had come from him. Then he realized it had been Fleur. Twisting around, he saw her face -- she was paper-white, and tears were flooding down her cheeks.

Slytherin let out an impatient sigh. "Fleur, if you cannot control yourself, please go. Go, and lie down. You need to gather your strength."

With a brief, miserable nod, Fleur raced out of the room.

"But she can't, can she?" Draco demanded, raising his head.

"She can't what?"

"Gather her strength. She's dying." It wasn't a question. "Isn't she."

"We are all dying." Slytherin looked neither moved nor unmoved by this turn of conversation, nor by the fact that he was holding it with a boy sprawled out at his feet as if he might never get up again. "She is just dying a little more rapidly than most. Rest assured she will live as long as she needs to do what I require of her."

"And I think I know what that is," said Draco. "Both of us in one room, one bed...what are you trying to do? We´re not cocker spaniels, you know. You can´t just go around mating us."

"But it would amuse me to do so," said Slytherin. "Of course, it would also amuse me to hang you both headfirst over a scorpion pit."

"Mating it is," said Draco hastily. His mind was only half on the conversation: the rest of it was mainly taken up with the immense effort it seemed to be taking to sit up, and the rather pressing thought, *it hurts*. "I´ll just run along then, and see if Fleur -"

"You will stay right here." Slytherin´s voice lashed at him like a whip. "I have not finished with you. I have only just begun."

Slytherin made a flicking gesture with his left hand, and Draco found himself propelled to his feet. His legs held him, just barely. He could feel cold sweat trickling down the back of his neck, stinging and icy.

"I need your loyalty," said the Snake Lord, "your obedience. I need you. But, just because I need you I will not allow you to rule me. I rule you. Mine is the greater power."

"I was told you were weak," said Draco. Concealing his knowledge no longer seemed of much importance. "And if you are so strong, why did you need us to fight the mantichore?"

"Clever question." Slytherin looked not the least bit discomposed. "I do not have my powers now, it is true. Which is why I have been using Fleur. But she is nearly drained, no longer of much use to me. And when I open the Orb, all my powers will be returned to me."

"Well, then what are you waiting for?" Draco snapped. He assumed that the Orb was the shining object that Slytherin had taken from the mantichore´s body. "Open it."

"First," said Slytherin, "the Gryffindor boy must die."



Harry. Draco felt as if someone had balled up all the misery and tension in the room, and jammed it hard into his solar plexus. Then he remembered the look on Harry's face when he had said, "*Do what you like with him, it doesn't matter to me.*" And the look on his face when he had told him about his parents. Harry hated him now. That was all there was to it.

"What does Harry dying have to do with anything?"

"As long as the Orb is not opened, I do not have my powers. As long as I do not have my powers, I am not really myself, and the demons cannot find me to extract the payment I cheated them of long ago. They do not see as people do; they sense the essence of a person, their life-spark - and mine is in that Orb. First I must appease the demons with blood, the blood of an Heir of mine who is also a Magid. Then my powers can be returned to me, the sword retained. And Hell will be satisfied."

*Hell is now satisfied.* What the demons in Draco's dream had said to him, upon giving him the sword. The dream that was reality - not his own memory, but Slytherin's, of making that deadly bargain.

"You can't kill Harry," he protested.

Slytherin's smile narrowed. "You defend him still?"

"I'm not defending him." Draco straightened up. "Don't you know his history? He defeated the most powerful, *immortal* Dark wizard of our time when he was a baby. His life is charmed, literally. There's some protection on him. I'm not sure it would be such a good idea for you to just Avada Kedavra him. The last guy who tried that spent thirteen years eking out life as a banana slug in Bulgaria before he got his body back."

"Fleur told me," said Slytherin, looking thoughtful. "She also told me that your Dark Lord managed to return himself to power, and attack Harry. Therefore he must have evaded this charm somehow."

"Well, you ought to know," snapped Draco. "Wormtail told

Hermione you killed him. Voldemort, I mean."

Slytherin snorted. "Not at all. We have never met, in fact. I simply told Wormtail that to convince him to enter my service. Not," he added, "that I won't kill him, when I have my powers back."

"No honor among thieves?" inquired Draco.

"No use for a spare Dark wizard cluttering up the playing field," said Slytherin. "You'll learn." He smiled coldly. "What you have just reminded me of is very interesting. I would simply have Fleur try the Killing Curse on your friend, but alas, for the purposes of the ritual it must be my hand that takes his life. A simple Sanguinus Charm should suffice to ensure that I can harm him without repercussions."

Draco shut his eyes. There was a buzzing in his ears and his arm throbbed as if it had been torn at by savage wolves.

"You are in pain," said Slytherin, sounding abstractly curious. "Aren't you?"

"Yes," said Draco through clenched teeth. "You know I am."

"Surely you know some simple charm against pain. Why do you not use your magic? Are you not a Magid? Are you not my Heir? You could heal yourself with a thought, if you let me show you how."

Draco shook his head. "Never mind. It doesn't hurt. Except in that way of being really painful. But no, I'm not interested."

"Draco," said the Snake Lord, and Draco jumped a little. It was rare that Slytherin spoke his given name. "You cannot resist using your power. You fear losing your soul, your identity. But what identity do you have? That given you by your father, forced on you by those you call friends. You don't even understand yourself. You see the world too simply, as evil and good."

"I've seen both," said Draco. "Evil and goodness. I *know* they exist."

"Of course they exist. The covenant that holds the world together calls for opposites: the dark and the light, uniformity and chaos, bodied and disembodied. Each half needs the other to survive. Without demons, there would be no angels. Without Slytherin, there would be no Gryffindor. Without Draco Malfoy..."

"No Harry Potter," said Draco flatly. "I get it. I´m not stupid."

"Then don´t behave as if you are. You have powers many would kill to possess. Use them. Do what you like with them."

"Nice try," Draco said bitterly. "You can´t do good with powers that come from Hell."

"Why not? There are angels of death, as there are angels of destruction. And all demons were angels once, and will be again some day. Perhaps you are neither one thing nor the other, neither angel nor demon, purely evil nor purely good, but you are the Heir of Slytherin and *you belong to me*. You have powers. Use them."

"Why?" Draco demanded. He could feel his face flush with angry blood. "So I can be like you? Why, when it gives me no pleasure to use them? Maybe you like calling up the powers of Hell, but I don´t. I wouldn´t be happy, being what you are. Did that occur to you?"

"And are you happy now?" Slytherin´s voice had dropped several octaves, turned silky and quiet. "I could make her love you," he said, and Draco flinched. "The love potion was unsatisfactory, I know, since she knew its falsity. It was meant as a punishment, after all. But I could make her love you and know no difference."

Draco closed his eyes, seeing Hermione in her red dress as she had come to him in the clearing at the dragon camp, recalling the look on her face, misery twisted with longing, and the traitorous elation he had felt knowing that emotion was for *him*, those tears for *him*, not for Harry this time.

"No." He opened his eyes, blinking away the memory of Hermione. "There is a price," he said, "for happiness such as that."

"There is a price for everything," said Slytherin. "For every advantage given to you, you will pay. For your looks, a price. For your talents, a price. For your strength, a price. For that second gift of life which returned you from death, a price. You are in debt to the balance of things, Draco Malfoy. You have been given more than you deserve. You were meant to pay that debt out in service. Service to *me*. It is what you were destined for. Fight it, and you will pay another and a worse way. What do you think will happen to the gifts you've been given, Draco, if you don't use them?"

Draco heard his father's voice in his mind. *What happens to a clock if you wind it backwards? It breaks.*

"Shut up!" Draco heard his own voice as if it came from far away, forced out through chattering teeth. "I don't want to hear any more."

"Then don't hear any more," said Slytherin coldly. "See."

He turned and pointed his hand at the far wall where the heavy carved screens stood, their brilliant designs of writhing dragons so bright it hurt Draco's eyes, the backs of which felt as if they had been rubbed with sandpaper.

A spark shot from Slytherin's hand, and the screens ratcheted back, folding outward to reveal what had been hidden behind them.

It was a mirror. Draco took a few steps forward, gazing in curiosity. As he approached it, the mirror seemed to grow both in size and familiarity. It was as tall as he was, shaped like an upright diamond and thickly framed in gold, and stood on two large clawed feet. A great deal of artistry had gone into the carving of the frame, which was alive with the shapes of leaves and animals. Above the peak of the mirror were three carved words: *Nosce Te Ipsum*.

It seemed, he realized, very similar to the Mirror of Erised - at which he had only glanced when he had seen it that once at Hogwarts, knowing what it was and what he would see in it, and what Hermione wouldn't. But the image of it was burned into his brain.

How, he wondered, could this be a torture device? "You know,

there's this thing about me, I actually *like* looking in mirrors. Call me insane, but -"

"You are not insane. Just very, very irritating." Slytherin reached out and grasped Draco by the arm, dragging him forward so that he stood in front of the mirror, staring down at his feet.

"This is not the Mirror you are thinking of," said Slytherin, behind him, his cold breath on Draco's neck making him shudder. "This is not the Mirror of Desire, that shows men the wish of their hearts. This mirror was made at the same time as that mirror, to be its opposite. This mirror does not show you what you want. Quite the contrary." His hand slid around Draco's neck to clasp his chin, and force his head up. "This mirror is called the Mirror of Judgement. It shows you what you really are."

*What you really are.*

A shudder like a bolt of lightning went through Draco, and he tried to twist away, but Slytherin held him hard in a grip like iron, his arm across Draco's throat. "No. I won't look."

"You will."

"I won't."

"Open your eyes," hissed the Snake Lord, and shook Draco hard.

Draco's eyes flew open.

And he looked.

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Stepping out of Rowena's tent, the icy brilliance of the cold blue sky stung Ginny's eyes. She glanced around uneasily for Ron, and saw him almost immediately - as always, his flame-red hair marked him out like a beacon. He was sitting on a long wooden bench, talking

animatedly to a large group of -

"Veelas?" said Ginny, widening her eyes in surprise. "Here?"

"They´ve been hanging around since the Snake Lord was defeated," said Benjamin, who had come up behind them silently. There were flakes of white snow caught in his black hair. "No one can seem to get them to go away."

Hermione stepped out of the tent behind Ginny, snapping the flap shut. She must have caught Benjamin´s last remark, because she snorted. "Doesn´t look like Ron´s trying too hard," she snapped. "Does it?"

Ginny was inclined to agree. Ron looked as if he were having the time of his life, surrounded by beautiful girls who were all looking at him admiringly. His cheeks were bright red with cold and he was gesturing animatedly as he talked, describing elaborate parabolas in the air with his freckled hands. "He´s probably telling them that he invented punctuation," Hermione added irritably. "Or the wheel. Or -"

Benjamin widened his dark eyes. "You mean he isn´t really the youngest Minister of Magic ever in your time?"

Ginny chortled while Hermione sputtered indignantly. "What! Ron? *Honestly!*"

"Oh come on, Hermione, it´s harmless," Ginny grinned.

"It is *not*," Hermione exclaimed, and poked Benjamin in the shoulder. "Go...retrieve him, would you?"

Giving her a very "Why me?" look, Benjamin trudged off towards Ron.

Ginny giggled, but stopped when she realized that Hermione was still bristling all over like an angry cat. "Hermione, really," she said, as diplomatically as she could. "You can´t fly off the handle every time any girl so much as *looks* at one of your guys, you know. Well,

unless it's Harry."

"I do not," Hermione began indignantly, then stopped, and smiled ruefully. "Oh, all right. I know what you mean. It's just that...well, it's Ron. And he's my best friend, and he deserves better than some empty-headed veela trollop." She grinned. "Not that they're necessarily all trollops, but you know....I just want him to have somebody as wonderful as he is. I want him to have the *best*."

"Oh." Ginny felt a burst of affection for Hermione. With all their bickering, it was sometimes hard to remember how much Ron and Hermione really cared for each other. But they did. "Does that extend to Draco, too?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, and Ginny turned to look at her. Her dark eyelashes were fringed with whiteness: ash, and snow, and her luminous pale skin glowed in the brilliant sunlight. The Lycanthe glinted silver against her throat. She looked very pretty, and very in control. Ginny bit her lip and plowed on. "Well, it's just that I mean, me and Draco...if there was a me and Draco...and I'm not saying there is... but if there was..."

"Ginny," said Hermione firmly, leaned forward, and kissed her on the forehead. "You *are* the best."

"Did I miss something?" said Ron, skidding up with Benjamin at his heels. "Is everybody getting kissed? Do I get kissed too?"

"Only if Benjamin wants to kiss you," said Hermione severely.

Benjamin looked horrified. Apparently he had not realized that, as the Heir of Gryffindor, he would be called upon to make such extreme sacrifices.

"I'm surprised you didn't get one of them to kiss you," grinned Ginny, jerking her chin towards the veela.

Ron looked miffed. "I was just explaining Quidditch..."

"You told them you *invented* Quidditch," put in Benjamin dolefully.

"Yes, well..." Ron was now red with rather more than cold. "I didn't want to say anything before, but what are you two wearing, anyway?"

Ginny glanced down at herself. Hermione did the same. They were both wearing the winter robes Rowena had created for them. Ginny, for one, had been very glad to have something to wear besides her ash-covered, flimsy summer pajamas. The robes were made of a silky thin wool, and she was sure that they were enchanted not to be scratchy or prickly, but rather soft and clinging. She loved the deep green color of hers, too.

"I think they're very pretty," said Hermione, tossing her hair.

"*You* look great," said Ron to her, and turned a severe glance on Ginny. "*Yours* are too tight. Couldn't she have given you anything...looser?"

"This is the way they're cut," sniffed Ginny. "You're just jealous that you didn't get anything to wear."

Ron snorted derisively. "Like what? Tights, or whatever they wear here?"

Benjamin glared at him.

"Not that there's anything wrong with tights," Ron added hastily.

"That's enough." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Everyone hold on to me," she announced, "*now*," and Ginny reached out hastily to clutch at Hermione's arm, seeing Ron and Benjamin doing the same. Hermione touched the Lycanthe at her neck. "*Mobiliarus*," she said, and the world around them spun away into darkness.

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Fleur glanced up as the door to the bedroom slammed open, and Draco came in.



He looked different.

Not in any clearly obvious physical way. But there was a wildness in his eyes, and a deathly pallor to his skin. He looked like someone who had had a number of terrible nightmares in quick succession and who still was not sure he had entirely woken up.

"That creature brought you your drinks," she said in a small voice, gesturing with her chin towards the low table by the fire on which sat, rather incredibly, a row of tall glasses filled with alcohol and topped with little green umbrellas. The glasses had clearly been charmed so the ice cubes would stay fresh.

"Well, I´ll be damned," said Draco, staring. Then he laughed. "Literally, too," he added, strode over to the fire, seized a glass, tossed the umbrella aside, and drained it.

Fleur sat up, staring at him. "Draco, what are you doing?"

"Getting drunk," he said, and slammed the glass back down on the table. "What does it look like?"

"Is that a good idea?"

"Is zat a good idea?´" he echoed, narrowing his eyes at her. "What, you don´t think I deserve a couple moments of fun? It would so nicely break up the moments of death and mayhem."

"He showed you the Mirror, didn´t he?" asked Fleur, looking at him hard.

Draco laughed. It had a brittle, explosive sound. "What Mirror? I don´t know what you´re talking about. He burned a hole in my arm, then he dragged me off to show me the army I´ll be commanding. Dementors, werewolves, vampires, icky things with horns sticking out of their ears... It´s like a dating club for archfiends. 'Where the lonely and the slimy connect.´"

"Draco...are you feeling all right?"

"Like I was hit by lightning after the Hogwarts Express ran me over. But let me drink a few more of these, and I'll be feeling great."

He downed another Mai Tai.

Fleur bit her lip, and held out her hand. "Please...come sit down."

"Next to you?" Draco sudden threw the now-empty glass at the fireplace. It shattered, and the fire hissed as the dregs of alcohol splashed the burning logs. "I don't think so. I'd rather kiss a dementor. And the way things are going, it looks like I might have to, 'cos that's who I'll be hanging around with for the next millenium."

"Millenium?"

"Yeah. I'm going to live forever. Didn't you hear? I get to live forever with Slytherin. Which I guess he thinks some kind of big prize, but since I've only known him a week and already I can't stand him, I'm less than excited. I don't exactly want eternity with the guy. But hey, at least my new uniform isn't gray. You like it?"

He threw his arms wide. Fleur, who hadn't even noticed he was wearing anything different, looked at him listlessly. "It is black. Everything you wear is black. You look the same."

"Well, aren't you determined to be difficult." He dropped his arms and walked over to her. She could see herself reflected in the dilated pupils of his eyes. He lifted his hand and put his fingers under her chin, urging her head up. He smelled of alcohol and anger, and his hands were shaking so violently that after a moment, he let her go. "If you were wondering if *you* get to live forever," he said with quiet malevolence, "you don't."

She felt tears sting the back of her eyes. "I know that."

"Good. I'd hate for you to get a nasty surprise."

She closed her eyes and felt two tears scald their way down her

cheeks. Normally she would have been ashamed to cry in front of someone else, but she was too tired to care.

He dropped his hand from her chin. "Cheer up," he said, in a tone that made her think of an iron fist wrapped in a silk glove.

"*Mariposus*," he whispered under his breath, and she glanced up, her eyes widening, to see a stream of multicolored light burst from his fingers. The light resolved itself into a hundred brilliant butterflies, fluttering and dipping, and she craned her head back to see them, remembering how Draco had come into her room at school and the butterflies she had conjured had landed on his shoulders and hands.

She looked at him hard, trying to gauge if he remembered, too, but his eyes were black and unreadable. "*Incendio*," he whispered. Fleur stiffened in horror as the dozens of colorful butterflies burst into tiny flames, like miniscule, burning stars. Draco looked down at her, the reflected sparks swarming in his eyes.

"That was horrible," she said shortly, as the last flames died.

"Look who's talking." His cloak had become unfastened. He stepped back and reclosed the clasp, which was bronze, and worked into the shape of two serpents with linked tails. He gave her a cold smile.

"And with that pleasant memory to warm you up, I'll be leaving you."

"Leave? Where are you going?" She was astonished at the desperation in her own voice. Malevolent as Draco was currently being, she did not want to be alone.

"Paying a little visit to Harry. Collecting some blood. Your Master needs it for a spell. Some people collect coins, he collects blood samples from helpless prisoners." Finished with his cloak, he dropped his hands. "Now there's a guy who really knows how to make his own fun."

"Don't go," she whispered, without really knowing what she was saying. Exhaustion made it difficult to focus her eyes properly.

"Stay? With you? How sweet." Crossing to the door, he paused beside her, leaned forward, and swept her hair away from her ear, brushing her cheek gently with the icy tips of his fingers. She felt his breath against her neck as he bent to her ear and whispered, "The blood I´m about to collect...*it´s on your hands, too.*"

She shuddered without speaking as he took his hand away, turned, and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

\*\*\*

*Demons!* turned out to be a book so long, detailed and nearly incomprehensible that Narcissa soon despaired of making any sort of useful sense out of it. It was five o´clock and she was only on Abbadon, King of the Abyss. *Abaddon is the chief of the demons of the seventh hierarchy, the king of the grasshoppers, or demon insects (described as having the bodies of winged war-horses and the poisonous curved tails of scorpions). As described in Revelations, Abbadon opens the gates of the abyss and unleashes upon the earth his swarms of demon locusts...*

Narcissa banged her head on the table. Why not? There was no one around to see her. "Demon locusts," she groaned. "Give me a break."

"Demon locusts are no joke," came a dry voice from behind her. "They can really ruin a picnic."

She spun around, her hand at her throat, and saw a familiar head and shoulders floating in the fireplace. Dark eyes regarded her narrowly.

"Severus," she said. "You scared me."

"I´m sorry." Snape inclined his head. He had always possessed a almost archaic set of courtly mannerisms, she remembered this from the time he and Lucius had been close. He wasn´t the hand-kissing type, but he would bow, and stand up for women when they entered a room. It had always struck her as at odds with his

otherwise very severe demeanor. "I was looking for..."

"Sirius?"

Snape looked every so slightly shifty. "Yes."

"Well, he isn't here. And I don't know when he'll be back. Can I give him a message?"

Snape hesitated for a moment, then nodded curtly. "I thought he might want to know that I translated the fire-letters on the wall of the cell where..." His voice trailed off.

"Where Lucius died? You can say it, Severus."

"Where he was murdered." Snape held up a folded piece of parchment. "It's a demon-banishing incantation."

"You mean a demon-summoning incantation."

"No, I mean what I said. I think he must have called something up, not liked what he saw, and tried to banish it. To no avail. I believe the banishing curse is demon-specific as well, but since Sirius borrowed my demonology text, I can't do a match."

"Ah," said Narcissa. "Well." She held out her hand for the parchment, and after a moment of hesitation, Snape relinquished it. "I'll give it to Sirius when he returns."

"Very well." Snape nodded curtly, and vanished.

Narcissa sat for a moment, staring at the parchment in her hand. Then she rose to her feet, went into the drawing-room, and with a quick "*Alohomora!*" opened the trap door that led to the dungeons.

She had never much liked the corridors under Malfoy Manor, and they were even worse when she was alone and in the tense state she was in currently. She held her wand high, trying to spread its illumination. She took a deep breath when she reached the dungeon gate before pushing it open. It gave a rusty scream which sent

shivers up her spine.

The demon was awake, as she had expected. She rather doubted that such creatures slept at all. It regarded her with whirling red eyes as she approached its cell.

Without preamble, she stopped dead in front of it and said: "Demon. What do you want?"

Its whirling eyes widened. "What does any prisoner want? To go free."

"I can't set you free. But I can send you back to Hell."

Its twisted little face reflected its doubt. "You would do that? Why?"

"Because I want to make a bargain with you. I'll send you back to Hell, in exchange for a favor from you."

The demon's face stretched into an ugly rictus-like grin. "A bargain, eh? Tell me more... I'm all ears."

\*\*\*

The trip forward in time was much like the trip back had been.

The Portkey deposited Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Benjamin on the front steps of Slytherin's castle. Hermione and Ron stumbled forward, but kept their feet; Benjamin and Ginny landed more gracefully, lightly as cats.

Once inside, the castle had a still, Sleeping-Beauty sort of feel to it, as if it were trapped outside of time. No breath of wind stirred the tapestries as they hurried after Benjamin along the narrow stone corridors, no sound of birds came through the open, glassless windows. There was no need for any wards on the adamantine prison to be taken down: the door was open.

They went into the cell and Hermione almost cried out: the walls were exactly the color blue she had seen in her vision of Harry. She

barely saw the tumble of odd heavy furnishings everywhere, the shimmering tapestries. The idea that she might be standing only feet from Harry in space, although a thousand years away in time, made her desperate. She pulled Ron and Ginny towards her, linking arms with them, nearly forgetting to say goodbye to Benjamin. It was Ginny who drew him towards her and kissed him on the cheek in the thanks. He turned bright pink, and then Ginny flipped the Time-Turner over and the room, the tapestries, the glowing walls, and the blushing Heir of Gryffindor vanished into the gray mist.

It wasn't so bad this time - cold and airless and intense, but Hermione kept tight hold of Ron and Ginny. When the world finally righted itself again, she was still on her feet, her arms linked with theirs. She opened her eyes.

The room was the same. Blue walls. The tapestries the same, dulled by age and years now. The same furniture. And there, against the far wall, sat Harry.

He looked exactly as he had in her vision: arms chained behind him, covered in blood, torn and scratched. But he was alive, and staring at them in astonishment. She flew across the room and flung herself at him, throwing her arms around him. His shirt was torn, stiff with blood, and scratched her fingers. She felt the muscles in his back contract as he struggled to move his hands forward, to get his arms around her, and his chest hitched under hers. His face was pressed against her hair. "Hermione," he said, his voice cracking with disbelief and astonishment. "*Hermione...*"

"It's me," she said, holding him more tightly. She could see, over his shoulder, the bindings that held him: two clear cuffs around his wrist attached to a thick chain which was itself attached to what looked like a large adamantine staple driven into the floor. The sight panicked her. She wanted, more than anything else in the world, to be able to free him, and couldn't imagine how it could possibly be done. Trying not to think about it, she drew back and kissed his face fiercely, striped with blood and grime though it was, and stroked his hair. "It's me...you must have known I would find you."

"I hoped you would," he said, his voice dry and strained, muffled in

her hair. "I missed you so much. I thought I heard your voice this morning, saying my name, and I thought it meant I must be dying, and hearing what I most wanted to hear before I -"

"Shh." She kissed his mouth shut. "Harry, I love you."

"I know. I love you too."

They sat locked together like that for a long moment, Hermione's arms tight around him. Finally, she let go and sat back.

"About time you let the poor guy get some air," said Ron's voice from behind her.

Hermione looked up; so did Harry. A huge smile spread across his face as he saw Ron and Ginny. He looked as if he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "I cannot *believe* you guys are here," he said.

"Come on, you knew we'd come after you," said Ron amicably, grinning at Harry. "We're your friends. We wouldn't let anything happen to you. Well," he added, taking in Harry's undeniably gory state, "aside from the imprisonment and the horrible injuries, of course."

Harry shook his head. "It's not my blood."

"Well, I'd hate to see the state of the other guy," said Ron, looking impressed. "What'd you do - peel him?" He grinned. "Was it Malfoy?"

Harry's smile vanished as if it had been wiped off his face.

Ron looked worried. "You didn't kill Malfoy, did you? That's gonna be hard to explain when we get back home. You'll get detention for sure."

"Where is Draco?" asked Ginny, kneeling down on the other side of Harry and touching his shoulder lightly.

"He's probably just in another cell, right?" said Hermione, feeling



uneasiness prickled under her ribs. "Right, Harry?"

Harry sighed, and leaned his head back. "I didn't kill Malfoy," he said, a touch bitterly.

Then he launched into the story of what had happened over the past two days, from waking up in the adamantine cell to Fleur coming to rescue them, at which point he was interrupted by both Ginny and Hermione making spluttering hissing noises. "Fleur? But..she's..she's such a..." Hermione began.

"A what?" demanded Ron, looking highly entertained.

"A tramp!" announced Ginny, pink around the ears. "Well, she is," she added defensively, catching Ron's amused look. "Draco told me that she practically kidnapped him and begged him for sex and..." she trailed off, realizing how this sounded.

"That's *his* story," snorted Ron. "Begged him for sex...yeah, right!"

"She's evil," said Harry.

They all turned and looked at him. "What?" said Ron.

"She's evil," said Harry, and went on to explain to them about the trip through the maze, the shapechanging guards, and what lay beyond the adamantine door. When he got to the fight with the mantichore, Hermione went ashen and felt as if she was going to be sick, remembering the picture from the Magical Bestiary of the animal with its two rows of razored teeth, its deadly sting. "She was in league with Slytherin. It was all a trick to get us to kill the mantichore for him. Once it was dead, the two of them showed up together and Slytherin told the guards to drag me off."

Hermione's hand flew to her mouth. If the mantichore was dead, then Slytherin had the Orb. And if he had the Orb...

"I can't believe Fleur would do that!" Ginny exclaimed. "I mean, I would have thought even she must have *some* scruples. Although, apparently not."

Ron looked equally shocked. "Oh, man. I wish I could get my hands on her. Not in that way, either," he protested hastily, at Hermione's look.

"What about Draco?" Ginny demanded. "Is he in another cell? Did Slytherin hurt him?"

Harry lowered his gaze. "Not exactly."

There was a short silence. *Something's wrong*, Hermione thought. She leaned forward and put her hand on Harry's cheek, gently turning his head to face her. "Harry, love, what is it?"

"It's about Malfoy," said Harry. "He--"

*Creak.*

A suddenly rattling sound split the air in the cell. Hermione glanced quickly towards the sound, and saw a large dark square beginning to appear in the far wall.

"Oh, hell." Harry had gone white. "Someone's coming. You've got to get out of here."

Ginny stood up and reached for the Time-Turner, but Ron leaped to his feet after her and seized her hand.

"No. We can't leave Harry."

"The Invisibility Cloak," said Hermione, desperately. "Ron--"

But Ron had already taken out the cloak. Hermione leaped to her feet as Ron backed against the wall. She and Ginny huddled close to him and he swept it around the three of them just as the dark space in the far wall opened to its fullest extension and Slytherin came in, dressed in the robes of green and black that she remembered from their first meeting. And after him came two guards, wrapped in gray

robes.

And after them, Draco.



\*\*\*

Several hours had gone by, and Lupin was bored. He had eaten all his chocolate, and played several games of noughts-and-crosses with himself by scribbling on the empty candy wrappers. And meanwhile, Sirius was getting nowhere with his shovel. Being Sirius, of course, he wouldn't admit it.

Finally, Lupin threw aside the stick he had been using to draw rude and amusing pictures in the dirt, and stood up. "Sirius!" he yelled. "This is getting ridiculous. Would you let me help?"

Sirius dropped the shovel irritably crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine. Go ahead."

Lupin got to his feet. With grave deliberation he unfastened the gray travelling cloak he was wearing, laid it on the ground, walked over to the tree, and braced his hands against the sides of the trunk.

And pushed.

*Rrrri p.*

The tree tore out of the ground as easily as if it had been a turnip Lupin was uprooting. Breathing hard, he pushed it sideways, and it fell to the ground with a loud whooshing noise, its trunk coming to rest on top of the wall. The roots of the tree poked up like reaching hands, and the dark space beneath was revealed.

Lupin turned around, dusting off his hands, to see Sirius glaring, and muttering under his breath. Lupin, with his sensitive hearing, was able to distinguish several words clearly: *showoff*, *git*, and *superhuman werewolf strength my* -

"Ahem," he interrupted. "Aren't we short on time?" He grinned. "Or just short on temper?"

Sirius returned the grin, then knelt down. The hollow space under

the tree had obviously been engineered by men: it was shallow and lined with stone to keep out the damp. As Lupin approached, he caught the sharp glint of light off the side of something metal inside the hollow. It was a long casket of some sort, which Sirius picked up and held up to the light. Too transparent to be adamantine, Lupin suspected it was made of some kind of adamant derivative. An anxious expression flicked across Sirius' face as he turned the box over, running his thumb across the smooth material, and stopped with his thumb on a dark, irregularly shaped keyhole. Reaching into his pocket, Sirius drew out the silver key set with red stones, and slid the end of the key into the lock.

The box clicked open as readily as if it had been locked only yesterday. Setting it down, Sirius ratcheted back the lid, and lifted out the object that lay inside. It was long, as long as his arm, and made of silver. The scabbard to a sword, engraved all over with brilliant designs of flowers and animals and leaves that flowed together intricately to form the word *Gryffindor*.

\*\*\*

Draco looked the same, and not the same.

His clothes were different, although that wasn't it, not exactly. He wore black as usual: black shirt and trousers, black boots, black cloak, although the cloak was lined in white-silver, and held across the chest by crossed chains of bronze in the shape of serpents. The white of the cloak lining contrasted with the black clothes and combined to make him look unreal, like a chess piece rather than a person. In fact, he looked as if he had been refined down to his most essential elements, as if everything unnecessary had been burned away. White skin, black eyes, silver hair, and the gold chain of the Epicyclical Charm glittering at his throat.

He stood shoulder to shoulder with the Snake Lord, and in his boots, they were nearly the same height. Slytherin reached out put his hand on Draco's shoulder, and Hermione, who remembered suffering that agonizing touch, wanted to cry out to him, but didn't.

"Draco," he said. "I will leave this to you. You know what to do."

Draco inclined his head and started forward, crossing the room to Harry. The guards trailed him as silently as ghosts. Harry raised his head as Draco approached, looking at him steadily, and did not change expression as Draco got gracefully down on his knees in front of him, so that their gazes were level. His face was pale and set, but his eyes were alive; they met and held Harry's: green eyes and silver, the Snake Lord's colors.

"Well, Potter," he said at last, and the drawling tone of his voice sent arrows of cold fire shooting through Hermione's veins. "It looks like you've gotten yourself into a fine fix here."

"I didn't get myself into this, Malfoy," said Harry evenly. "You did."

"You shouldn't have killed that basilisk back in second year," said Draco, in the same conversational tone, as if Harry hadn't spoken. "You really hacked old Slythie off. If you hadn't done that, maybe he'd let you live, but now..." Draco grinned as Harry made an involuntary movement towards him, and the adamant cuffs rattled. "Let's just say I wouldn't want to be in *your* chains."

"Yesterday you were in my chains," said Harry evenly. "But I guess you figured a way out, didn't you, Malfoy? You backstabbing bastard," he added, without expression, as if he had just said, "Good morning."

"Don't tell me you're feeling betrayed, Potter," Draco grinned. "That's *adorable*."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, could we skip the obligatory taunting and just cut swiftly to the point of this little visit?"

"Maybe taunting *is* the point of this visit," said Draco equably. "It's certainly the fun part. Although possibly not from where you're sitting. Tell me a little more about how betrayed you feel, why don't you? The radiant bonds of our friendship shattered, and all that. Tell me how much you'll miss me."

"I can't," Harry said. "I don't get to the part of Arithmancy where we cover numbers so small they don't exist until next year."

"That is," Draco said, "assuming that for you, there is a next year. Or even a next week. Let's face it, Potter, even the concept of *tonight* isn't looking like one you're going to be having any close acquaintance with."

Harry's chains rattled as he leaned back against the wall with an exasperated sigh. "Look, what do you *want*, Malfoy?"

"What do I want? World peace, Potter. A suede coat that won't get ruined in the rain. A broomstick that'll do Mach Two. Oh, and some of your blood."

"My *blood*?"

Draco turned and looked over the shoulder at one of the faceless gray-robed guards. "Unchain his wrist," he said, and as the guard reached forward towards Harry, Draco grinned again. "His *left* wrist."

Hermione felt her heart sink down into her stomach. That smile...she hadn't seen that kind of smile on Draco's face in months. It was a nasty sort of childish, amused smile, the same smile he had smiled third year when he'd stopped in the hall to tell her that her teeth were so big, the Druids could have used them for places of worship, and all the Slytherins had laughed.

She wondered if they would laugh now. Probably.

She couldn't imagine how Harry retained such an indifferent expression as the guard reached forward and none too gently, did something to his left wrist that freed it from the cuff. If it were her, she would have screamed at Draco, kicked at him with her feet. She wanted to do that now, just as she wanted to rush over and put her hands on his shoulders and force him to promise her that he was only pretending.

As the guards unfastened Harry, Draco reached forward and slid his



hand into Harry's shirt pocket. When he removed it, he was holding Harry's pocketknife. He glanced over at the guard, and the guard handed over Harry's now-freed wrist as impersonally as if it were a pencil. Harry didn't struggle or try to get away, just watched Draco through narrowed green eyes as Draco flicked the blade of the knife open and tested its edge with a finger.

Beside her, Hermione felt Ron tense, and she gripped his arm hard.

Draco turned Harry's hand over in his grip so that it rested palm-up, and placed the edge of the blade against the inside of Harry's wrist. "Do you remember," he said, still conversationally, "when you sliced open my hand with this?"

"I did it to save your life," said Harry. He didn't move, but Hermione, so close to him she could see the blood pounding in the pulse at his throat, felt a slow and sickening fear sweep over her. How could Harry be so still, so self-possessed? She knew he wasn't calm - she could see the sweat darkening the back of his shirt, plastering his dark hair to his neck. But he didn't change expression. *He learned that from Draco*, she thought.

Draco glanced down, and she saw his eyes flash. "Which you would have done for anyone."

"I wouldn't share my blood with just anyone."

"Oh, really?" Draco's voice dripped sarcasm and something else. "I bet you wish you'd let me die when you had the chance."

"No," said Harry, quietly but with conviction. "No. I'd do the same thing again."

Draco's hand where it held the knife jerked almost imperceptibly. Hermione, trying desperately not to move, saw his hands, and her heart skipped a beat. Draco's hands had always been immaculate, well-groomed, the nails perfect half-moons. Now they were bitten down to the bloody quick and there were deep indents on his palm where, perhaps, his nails had been driven in. *What has he done? What has been done to him?*

Draco recovered himself. "Nice try, Potter, but it's a little too late to suck up to me. Anyway, I thought you had more spine than that."

"Drop dead, Malfoy."

"Already have done, mate."

"If at first you don't succeed," said Harry shortly, "try again."

Draco pursed his lips and whistled. "Nice comeback. Taking lessons from those more clever than you, Potter? Sirius giving you pointers?"

Harry laughed. It was such an unexpected sound that Hermione nearly jumped. Draco's eyes flew wide. "What's so funny, Potter?"

"I was just wondering," said Harry, "what Sirius would say if he knew what you were doing with his knife right now."

This time, Draco did jump, and the edge of the knife bit down into Harry's arm. Draco yanked the knife back as blood sprang up around the edges of the cut, and spilled over, splattering the floor.

One of the gray-robed servants darted forward and pressed a square of cloth over the bleeding cut. Within a moment, it was soaked in scarlet. The cloth was retracted, and the servant retreated, backing towards Slytherin, who held out a hand for it.

Hermione averted her gaze, nauseated. *What is he going to do with Harry's blood?*

Harry apparently had no such concerns. He was ignoring his bleeding arm, looking at Draco instead, and the look on his face was awful. Hermione thought that if Harry ever looked at her like that, she would want to die.

Draco meanwhile was very white and looked a bit as if he were

going to be sick. He flicked the knife shut, and dropped it back into Harry's pocket. There was blood on his hands now and blood on the white lining of his cloak.

"Malfoy," said Harry, so quietly Hermione had to strain to hear him. "You don't have to do this."

"I'll die if I don't." Draco's voice was a monotone, and Hermione was struck by his choice of words - not *he'll kill me if I don't*, but *I'll die*. As if it was quite out of his control.

"There are worse things than dying. I guess you should know that."

A little of the old wicked sparkle shot across Draco's expression. "You and your friends brought me back," he pointed out coolly. "I guess you underestimated me, Potter."

"No. I overestimated you. And now we'll all pay for it."

"Everything has to be paid for," said Draco, in an absent voice, as if he were reciting something he had learned off by rote.

"And what am I paying for?"

"What you've done to me," said Draco flatly.

Harry looked incredulous. "What I've *done* to you? I haven't done anything to you other than save your bloody life, and stick up for you, and trust you! I let you hang around my girlfriend even though I know how you feel about her -"

"My life never would have needed saving if it hadn't been for you!" Draco shouted. Scarlet spots of rage dotted his cheekbones. "If it hadn't been for you, I would have been a loyal servant of Voldemort's and my father's. I never would have fought them, never would have known what it was to want to fight them, to want to be any different," and he spat out *different* as if it were a terrible word. "My father would be *alive*, if it wasn't for you."

Harry blanched, shock and indignation darkening his expression.

Hermione knew exactly how he was feeling. She knew how Draco felt about Harry. How *could* he say these things?

And yet he was saying them. The anger in his eyes was real; they seemed to be spitting silver sparks. "I guess you know what it's like to have a destiny, don't you, Potter?" he snarled. "But do you know what it's like to turn it away? To fight it and fight it every second of every day until there's nothing left of you but ragged shreds and all you want is to die and get some peace? And then you show up, playing the hero, telling me you've never wished you could die. 'Not me. Never.' Well, of *course* you haven't. I don't live in your head the way you live in mine. I don't know why that happened, it just did. I haven't changed you. You've changed me. And you've made my life intolerable-"

Shock sped across Harry's face, followed by rage; he was struggling to get to his feet, and had thrown himself forward so far that the chain that bound him was drawn out to its fullest extension. Hermione could see the bands of metal cutting into his wrist. "It's not my fault those things happened!" he shouted at Draco. "I never chose any of them! I can't change what I am!"

"*And neither can I!*" Draco shouted back, and yanked his left sleeve up suddenly, extending his arm, showing it to Harry. He drew it back quickly, but not before Hermione saw, as Harry must have seen, the black brand of the Dark Mark seared into the skin of his forearm.

And Harry was silent. He leaned back, and the chain rattled as it struck the stones. He no longer looked angry, just stunned. "So that's the way it is," he said, slowly.

"That's the way it's always been," said Draco flatly. "Really, we're no different, you and I - we're both what we were born to be. We're just on opposite sides of the divide, that's all. I'm sorry for it, Potter. And sorry for you."

He did sound sorry. Hermione felt her heart beating very slowly, as if her blood had thickened to the consistency of taffy. *This isn't happening.*

"Bollocks to that," said Harry firmly. "It's about choices, Malfoy. It's your choice to make."

"I made my choice a long time ago," said Draco.

"Live with it, then," said Harry. "Since you value your life so much." Draco got to his feet. "I intend to. Me living with it - that's sort of the point."

Harry craned his head back and looked up at Draco, who slid his eyes away.

"At least tell me how I'm going to die," he said, quietly. "You owe me that much."

Draco looked at him for a long moment. His eyes were dark, nearly expressionless: they were only human eyes, the eyes of a boy, and yet they had death in them.

"When it comes," he said. "It will be quick."

And he walked back towards Slytherin.

\*\*\*

"So that's your bargain?" said the demon, looking narrowly at Narcissa. "You will send me back to Hell, in exchange for that information?"

"I know Slytherin will try to kill one of them. Either Harry, or my son. To keep from fulfilling the bargain he made with you. I want to know if there's any way that can be prevented, that you can be forced to take him instead -"

"The powers of Hell cannot be forced." The demon's eyes spun in concentric circles of red and gold.

"How can the end of this bargain be accomplished? How is it consummated? Explain."

The demon shook its head. "Take the wards off the cell."

"Explain first."

The demon shook its head. "I am bound by the bargain we make, it is unbreakable for me. That is my nature. It is not your nature. Humans are liars. Take the wards off the cell and speak the Banishing charm, and then I will tell you what you want to know."

"Swear first," she said. "Swear that you won't harm me when I release you. And swear that there is a way that Slytherin can be taken, instead of my son or Harry."

"I swear it," said the demon, and Narcissa stepped towards the bars of the cell, and, as Sirius had showed her, dismantled the wards. That accomplished, she pointed her wand at the Demon and read off the piece of paper in her hand the words of the Banishing Charm. She was none too happy to be using a charm Lucius had used, especially not one that had (possibly) resulted in his messy death. But she didn't see that she had much choice.

As she reached the end of the incantation, a burst of flame leaped up and circled the demon. It laughed, throwing back its head, reaching out its hands to the fire.

Narcissa threw down the parchment she was holding. "Now tell me!" she shouted, over the crackling of the fire and the sound of the demon's laughter. "Tell me what I want to know!"

The demon stopped laughing, and looked straight at her. "In the original bargain, Slytherin promised us a Magid heir of his own blood, and that is what we will take. Unless the Snake Lord can be persuaded to offer up the sword to us willingly with his own hand, in which case we will take him instead."

"With his own hand?" Narcissa echoed faintly.

The demon nodded.

"But he´ll never do that!" she cried furiously, and flung herself towards the bars, but the fire had made them red-hot, and she jumped back. "*He´ll never do that!*"

"Really not my problem," the demon replied, and vanished with a wink in a burst of flame.

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The black opening in the wall was just closing itself up after Slytherin and his entourage, when Hermione ducked out from under the invisibility cloak and dashed towards Harry, Ron at her heels.

Harry was sitting as he had when Draco had stood up: staring at his bleeding arm with a very, very strange expression. Hermione fell to her knees beside him. "Harry. Are you all right?"

He nodded. There was a distant look in his eyes, as if he had gone to some very dark place. She put her arm around his shoulders and gently stroked the back of his neck. He didn´t react.

"He was acting, Harry," she said. "He was just *acting*."

"I wouldn´t be so sure," said Ron.

She flipped her gaze irritably to him. "He *was*. Of course he was."

"I´m Draco Malfoy, and this is my impression of a Completely Bonkers Psychopath," said Ron, in a rather squeaky imitation of Draco´s voice. "I don´t *think* so, Hermione. Come on, he was totally evil. Did you see his outfit?"

"His *outfit*? Ron, if you haven´t got anything useful to say -"

"All I´ve got to say, is that if he was acting, it was amazingly convincing."

Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. "He´s a *good* actor. We all know that about him."

"He's a miserable little twonk, we know that about him too," pointed out Ron.

"He would never hurt Harry," said Hermione, her voice coming out on an angry hiss.

"He *cut* him, Hermione," said Ron, starting to look angry.

"He must have had to!" she snapped, turning back to Harry. "He was trying to tell you something, Harry, I could tell--"

"By stabbing him in the arm?" Ron shook his head. Some say it with flowers," he deadpanned, "Malfoy says it with knives."

Hermione tilted her chin up and looked at Ron squarely. "Do you still hate him so much?"

Ron's expression softened. "No. But Hermione - *he might not have a choice*. You know that, right? He could have been under the Imperius curse. Not everyone can fight that off like Harry. That sword might have finally gotten to him--"

"Ron," said Harry, speaking up for the first time.

--Lupin said it was really powerful. Maybe Slytherin threatened him with something. Maybe he ran out of that Will-Strengthening Potion thing. Maybe--"

"RON," said Harry more firmly. "*Where is your sister?*"

Ron paused in mid-gesture, and turned to where he, Hermione and Ginny had been standing a few minutes before. "Ginny?" he said, edgily. "Come out from under the Cloak, will you?"

There was no answer.

"Ginny?" said Ron again, more faintly this time.

Nothing. Going very white, Ron leaned back against the wall as if his legs had given out.



"Oh my God," said Hermione, her hand going to her mouth. "She went after them. The door was still open - *she went after Draco.*"

Ron slid down the wall and collapsed on the floor. "She wouldn't have," he said numbly. "She couldn't do something so stupid."

"If it had been Hermione," said Harry softly, "I'd go after her."

"But she's not in love with Malfoy," said Ron blankly. "Is she?"

Hermione just looked at him.

"Fuck," he said, and covered his face with his hands.

Harry looked at Hermione. She nodded, got up, and went to kneel by Ron. "Ron," she said softly, gently touching his shoulder. "She's got the cloak and the Time-Turner. She can get away. She'll be fine."

Ron didn't move. Hermione could hardly blame him. She had no sisters and brothers herself, Ron was the closest thing she had to a brother, and the idea of anything happening to him was too horrible to contemplate.

"I can't believe she went after Malfoy," said Ron, finally, in a dry voice. "Well, I guess we'll find out pretty soon whether or not he's trustworthy, won't we?"

"Don't say that," Hermione began desperately, when a sudden and explosive gasp of surprise from Harry interrupted her. She turned in surprise to see what Harry was looking at.

He appeared to be staring down at his own shirt front. Hermione wrinkled her brow in confusion. "Harry?"

"Hermione, come here," he said urgently.

She got up and walked back over to Harry, followed by Ron.

"The knife," said Harry, still staring down at his shirt. "Take it out of my pocket."

She bent to touch Harry's cheek, and then leaned over and reached into his pocket.

She lifted out the knife.

And paused, staring.

The knife looked much as it had. Closed, the dull edge of the blade glimmered a dull silver. The bone handle was etched with Harry's initials: HJP. There was a faint smear of blood on the side of the blade. But none of those things were what caused Hermione, Ron, and Harry to stare.

Wound around and around the knife, like a vine wrapping the trunk of a tree and glittering pale gold in the blue light of the room, was Draco's Epicyclical charm on its thin gold chain.



#### References:

- 1) The song the dwarves were singing was "I May Be A Tiny Chimney Sweep But I've Got An Enormous Broom", lyrics by Rave. The full song can be found [here](#).
- 2) "Minions from hell getting you down?" -- Angel.
- 3) "Don't look at me like that. I'm not the one who needs to brush up on her finger pantomime." -- Angel.
- 4) "We could get sushi and not pay." -- Repo Man.
- 5) "The covenant that holds the world together calls for opposites: the dark and the light, uniformity and chaos, bodied and

disembodied." Neil Gaiman, *The Books of Magic*.

6) "Let's just say I wouldn't want to be in your chains." -- Angel.

## Draco Sinister Chapter Thirteen: Through A Glass Darkly

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Alcohol and fire did not mix, thought Draco, staring into the grate, where the flames had burned themselves down to a bed of glowing red embers. He had now made it through three more Mai Tais since returning to the bedroom, and his surrounding were starting to look a little peculiar. The warmth of the fire, combined with the heat of the alcohol running through his blood, was making him sweat through his clothes, not to mention the fact that his vision was blurring. He wondered if it were entirely normal that the liquor in his glass was staying quite steady while the furniture seemed to be sloshing up and down.

Blurred as it was, the room had started to remind him of his father's study back at the Manor. The same thick stone walls, ominous tapestries full of snakes and spiders, the same heavy armchairs; how often had he seen his father sunk into a chair by the fire, glass of Firewhiskey Regal in hand, staring moodily into the flames, exactly as he was doing now. He almost felt as if he were back home, or if not at home, at least in some place other than this fortress: a place both foreign and strangely familiar, where reality assumed the texture of a dream.

Through the silence, he heard Slytherin's voice in his head again, telling him about the covenant that held the world together, the necessity of opposites, the dark and the light, night and day, good and evil. Freezing cold and furnace heat, deadly blackness and petrifying light. He saw Harry's face, and the expression on it when Harry had looked at him in the cell -not quite rage, not quite disgust, not quite disappointment, but a far worse combination of all three.

*What's wrong with me? Why am I thinking about these things when there's no point?* He glanced down, and saw his own distorted

reflection in the side of the silver cup he held: the smooth plane of one cheek, marred only by the tiny scar on his cheekbone, the silver of his eye. *Or maybe I'm just getting really drunk.* He put the cup he was holding down on the table next to the chair, very carefully, and waved a hand at the fire. "Incendio," he whispered, and the flames leaped up again as if new. The amber light of the fire lanced through the green liquid in his glass, turning it gold. He leaned back, resting his head on the back of the armchair, very slowly lowering his eyelids so that he looked at the firelight through his lashes, a fringe of silvery grass.

A shadow passed across the fire. He ignored it. The images that danced across his inner lids held his attention. The Mirror of Judgement, its silvery surface reflecting back at him: first his own pale frightened face, then...other things. Afterwards, he'd barely resisted Slytherin dragging him off to examine his "army." Which was ridiculously vast. Dementors, werewolves, trolls and various other nasties stretching as far as the eye could see. He had hardly cared. Fleur had told him that Slytherin would show him things so terrible that he might die of them. Well, he hadn't died, but what he had seen left a white-hot trail across his soul. *Some things you don't recover from.*

Another shadow passed in front of his eyelids. This time, he felt his muscles tense. There was someone in the room with him. He swung around in the chair, half-expecting to see Fleur, or Slytherin, or another random minion. But not who he did see.

Standing in front of him, her flame-colored hair seeming to light a halo around her pale face, was Ginny.

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It had started to rain. The grass around Sirius and Lupin's feet was wet, and soaked through the cuffs of their trousers as they waited on the hillside. Their heads and shoulders were dry, however, thanks to the Parapluieus Charm Lupin had cast after they left the Potter house. Sirius had been too absorbed in thought to pay much attention to the weather - too absorbed in thought, and in staring at the scabbard that was, without any doubt, the Gryffindor Key. It was

a beautiful thing, so well-made that the art that had gone into carving the flowers and leaves all up and down the sides of it almost had nothing to give it. The idea that it had belonged to generations of Potters, James included, made Sirius so nervous at the thought of dropping or damaging it that Lupin had suggested he cast a Reductus charm on it to shrink it to the size of his hand so he could conceal it carefully in the inner pocket of his cloak, which he did.

"What are we waiting for again, Sirius?" Lupin queried, shivering slightly in the bitter wind. All nature seemed to be caught up in Sirius' dark, preoccupied mood - silver-black clouds scudded across a sky the color of wet iron, and the wind made the tree branches sing mournfully.

"It's be easier to catch our ride up here," said Sirius, as they arrived at the top of the hill behind the Potters' old house, Sirius took a small silver whistle from a pocket of his cloak, and blew it; it made a sad, shrill noise. Without any further explanation, he repocketed it.

Far sooner than he had anticipated, they heard the flap of wings, and spun around to see -

An owl?

A small, apricot-colored horned eagle owl.

Lupin blinked. "Little small to carry both of us, don't you think?" he asked, as the bird settled on Sirius' shoulder and pecked gently at his shoulder. He took the parchment that had been tied to its leg, and unrolled it as the owl took off again, pale wings beating hard against the dark sky.

"It's from Narcissa," said Sirius, when he had finished, and handed the letter over to Lupin. "She wrung some information out of that demon, apparently. Nothing too useful, though."

Lupin, having scanned the letter, was about to reply when a large shadow blotted out what little light the weak sun had been casting on the parchment. He looked up, and saw the circling form of a huge animal circling down towards them - the body of a horse,

ornamented by the wings and head of an eagle's and a lion's thrashing tail.

"Buckbeak?" he demanded, turning to Sirius. He recognized the hippogriff, of course, he had seen Sirius ride him before, and remembered him from the time he had lived tethered outside Hagrid's hut at Hogwarts. He had never gotten too close to him, though, for very good reasons. "Sirius..."

The hippogriff landed on the grass just ahead of them, and strode over to Sirius. Buckbeak was a beautiful animal, his dark gray coat blending into tawny plumage at the wings, his eyes gleaming and bright. He ducked his head against Sirius's shoulder, and Sirius was about to reach up and stroke his feathered head when he saw that the hippogriff had stiffened and was staring past him, eyes narrowed.

A low rumble rattled in Buckbeak's throat, and he started to back away. "Beaky, what..?" Sirius began, turning to follow the anxious hippogriff's gaze.

He saw Lupin, standing with his arms folded, his robes swirling about him in the stiff wind like black, folding wings. He shook his head a fraction. "Sirius. It's me."

"*Ligatus*," said Sirius, holding out his wand. A silver rope sprang from the end of it. One end wound itself around Buckbeak's neck; the other hardened and reshaped itself, becoming a handle in Sirius's fist. Gripping the hippogriff's leash firmly, he turned back to look at Lupin. "What do you mean it's you?"

"He senses I'm a werewolf," said Lupin, looking tensely at Buckbeak. "He's afraid of me."

'Afraid of you? No offense, but if it came to hand-to-beak combat, I think he could take you."

"That doesn't matter. He's part horse. Horses hate wolves. It's in their blood."



Sirius stroked a hand down Buckbeak's neck. The hippogriff stood rigid, every inch of his body tensed as he glared at Lupin. "Horses also hate lions, and he's part lion. You'd think he'd be a little more tolerant. I know animals don't like you, but I thought - a magical creature like Buckbeak - I mean, you can handle grindylows -"

"Those are *dark* creatures. Buckbeak's a magical animal, created from other animals, he has an animal's instincts. He doesn't know what to make of me. I don't look like I'm anything more than human- but I'm not, and he senses that."

Sirius shook his head. "You are human."

"I'm not, you know," Lupin said, patiently.

Sirius looked at him hard.

"Maybe I don't want to be, either," he added.

"Maybe you don't." Sirius rested his head briefly on Buckbeak's side, then raised his eyes. "But you still have to get on this hippogriff with me. I don't see another way for us to get where we're going. You know the way, but we can't Apparate. I'm sure there are wards up all around the castle, we'll get splinched for sure."

Lupin shook his head, and took a step towards Sirius.

Buckbeak reared back, nearly knocking Sirius over. Sirius ducked out of the way, narrowly avoiding behind smacked in the face with one of the hippogriff's wildly beating wings. "Beaky!" he snapped, yanking hard on the rope that tied him to the hippogriff. "Buckbeak! Settle down!"

Buckbeak didn't look like he wanted to settle down. He continued to plunge and rear, eyes rolling wildly. Lupin didn't come any closer, but stood where he was, not moving.

"Buckbeak," said Sirius again, his voice low and soothing, pulling the hippogriff towards him by the chain he had conjured. Lupin

watched, feeling apprehension curdling in the pit of his stomach. It was simply a fact that he had grown to accept, that animals loathed him. After he had been bitten, his family had had to get rid of all their pets, their cats and dogs, even the rabbits in the outside hutch would wince and huddle away from him when he passed by.

There had always been werewolf clans in the woods near where he had lived as a child, which was how he came to be bitten in the first place. He remembered one of the elders telling him when he was a child, *You are outside the world now, not of it. Animals will shun you, knowing what you are, and silver, the blood of the earth, will reject you. Wherever you go the earth will try to heave you off its face, for you are an unnatural thing and the earth hates that which is outside its nature.*

"We could just Summon our broomsticks," he pointed out, speaking very quietly, although he knew it was no use, as it never was any use when Sirius got a bee in his bonnet about something.

"Buckbeak...is...faster," panted Sirius, still holding the hippogriff's leash tightly. He reached out and firmly stroked the plumage at the side of the animal's neck, and chuckled Buckbeak under the chin. Very slowly, after repeated cajoling and stroking, Buckbeak had calmed down enough to rest his head on Sirius's shoulder, although his tail still lashed from side to side.

Sirius turned around, his black hair pasted to his forehead with rain, and held out a hand to Lupin. "Come on, Remus," he said.

Lupin approached slowly, remembering suddenly and not without amusement the bandages Draco had worn on his arm for a ridiculously long time during third year, after Buckbeak had injured him. Well, any animal willing to bite Draco the way he had been back then couldn't be all bad. He reached out and laid a hand against Buckbeak's flank. The hippogriff flinched, his skin rippling under Lupin's touch, but he did not move away.

Lupin raised his eyes and saw Sirius, looking done in but grinning at him all the same, his eyes sparking. "See?" he said, catching his breath. "Easy."

Lupin didn't say anything. He let Sirius help him up on Buckbeak's back and sat still while his friends clambered up behind him. He could feel the hippogriff's skin writhing and twitching where he touched it and knew that Buckbeak suffered him as a rider only out of love for Sirius. Which wasn't the worst reason, he supposed, to suffer anything.

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"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Are you going to wear that Charm, or not? It's not safe, just holding it like that."

Harry was silent. Hermione gazed at him, full of anxious curiosity. Still chained to the wall, Harry had managed to wriggle around so that his bound wrists were in front of him, rather than in back. He still looked uncomfortable, but slightly less so. She looked down at her hand where it was wound together with his, resting on his knee. His other hand held the Epicyclical Charm, the charm gripped in his fist, the gold chain threaded through his fingers. As if he neither wanted to let go of it, nor knew what to do with it.

She glanced over and looked at Ron, who was leaning against the wall near the entrance to the cell, flipping through a book he'd found tucked between the cushions of one of the sofas pressed against the wall. It looked like it was entitled *How To Be Evil*, by Steve The Third. That can't be much of a distraction from his anxiety about Ginny, she thought. She would have liked to go over and offer him consolation or company, but she could tell that he wanted to be left alone, and anyway Harry needed her more at the moment.

She fought down her feelings of panicky anger. What *was* Ginny thinking, she thought in despair. She tried to be charitable. Well, if it had been Harry, she would have gone after him without thinking, wouldn't she? Of course, Ginny couldn't possibly love Draco as

much as Hermione loved Harry. She barely knew him. She didn't even know him as well as Hermione did, didn't love him like...well *that* was an unproductive line of reasoning. And wouldn't bring Ginny back, either.

"I don't know," said Harry finally.

"You do believe me that he was just acting, don't you?"

Harry expelled a very weary-sounding breath. "Yes. I believe you. I believe you that he didn't knife me on purpose, either, although I do think he probably got a bigger kick out of it than you're willing to admit."

"Why?" said Hermione, sharply. "Would you get a kick out of it, if your situations were reversed?"

Harry leaned his head back against the wall, half-closing his eyes. "Don't start."

She scrambled around on her knees until she faced him. "Harry, I know this has something to do with whatever it was he told you to get you angry enough to break down that door. Doesn't it?"

"Maybe." Harry didn't open his eyes.

"Would you please tell me what he said?"

A short silence. "I'd really rather not," said Harry.

Hermione fought down the urge to shake him. She wanted to protest that he shouldn't hide this from her, that they always told each other everything, but then she knew that wasn't true. It was Ron who always told her everything; while she could read Harry's expressions well enough, Harry was much more likely to try to keep from speaking about his feelings to either of them, and the more something tore him up inside, the harder he worked to hide it.

"It wasn't about you," Harry added, as an afterthought.

A short wave of guilty relief passed over her. "I didn't think it would have been," she lied.

Another short silence.

"Harry, *please*," she said.

His eyelids lifted slowly, and he looked at her, his irises darkening. "I'll just tell you that it was something really, really terrible," he said. "Something I won't forget. Ever. Something unforgivable."

She shook her head. "You have to forgive him, Harry."

"*Why?*"

"Because whatever it was he said, he was just trying to save your life. And he must have known you'd hate him for it. Can't you understand how hard it must have been for him to make that sacrifice?"

"You're *defending* him?"

Hermione set her chin. "Would you rather I didn't tell you what I really thought? Would you rather I didn't tell you when you were wrong?"

"He could have done it some other way."

"*What* other way? Anything that would get you that angry would make you hate him, there's no way around that."

Harry was silent. He looked strained; the skin of his face seemed to be pressing back against the bones.

"Harry, he would *never* hurt you on purpose. Not like that. I mean sure, he'll jab at you and he'll try to unsettle you and part of that is because he doesn't even really understand how he feels about you, only that you mean something to him, but he doesn't know what. It doesn't fit into any recognizable category of experience for him. He's never had a brother, Harry. He's never even really had a

friend. Not someone who could match him intellectually. Not someone whose good opinion he'd have to exert any effort to keep. He doesn't know how to act towards you. So he falls back on being sarcastic, or nasty, and then when he is kind, you don't trust that kindness, and you throw it back at him. Come to think of it, he's actually pretty patient with you."

"*Patient?*" Harry spluttered, staring at Hermione with a disbelief so huge it was almost funny. "Malfoy?"

"There you go again, calling him Malfoy," said Hermione serenely. "What's the point? Can't you say his name? He's going to be related to you--"

"I am not related to Malfoy! He is not a part of my family!"

"But in a way, Harry, he is. What do you think family is? People who are tied to you, and you don't get to choose who they are, and you can't change them and you have to live with them and you just have to love them anyway."

Harry looked at her sideways and she realized how inapplicable this was to his own upbringing. She bit her lip.

"It's a bit much," he said flatly, "asking me to love Malfoy."

"Well, you could start off just by using his first name, and work from there."

Harry look mutinous. "He calls me Potter."

"Yes, he does." Hermione tilted her head up, and, to Harry's surprise, kissed him lightly on the temple. "Because if anything between you two is going to change, you're going to have to be the one to change it. You've got the advantage over him, Harry. You've had friends. You know how to treat them. He doesn't. He just reacts instinctively. If you treat him like a friend, he'll be the best friend you ever had. And if you treat him like your worst enemy, then that's what he'll be."

"He doesn't think of me as a friend," said Harry truculently, but Hermione could see the stubbornness crumbling away behind his eyes, leaving a clouded anxiety that she could read as easily as she could always read his expressions.

"No," she said, gently, "maybe not. You're less a friend in his mind than you are the better part of himself."

Harry looked down at her. And she reached over, and took the Epicyclical Charm out of his hand. She felt its weight in her palm, so familiar, and so light for what it was - the essence of a human life, made manifest. She had grown so used to its pressure around her throat that for the past few days she had woken up reaching for it, startled and bereft to find that it was not there. Now she unclasped the chain, and looked at Harry.

He bent his head, and she fastened the chain around his neck, dropping the Charm down into his shirt. "That's a lot of responsibility," he said, staring down at it.

"Not for you," said Hermione. "It's just...what you are."

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Ginny stood frozen, Invisibility Cloak wrapped around her, looking at Draco. For a moment, when she had first come in, she almost turned around and left, wanting to talk to him, and not wanting it. It seemed like every time she saw him these days he looked different: another step away from his known and recognizable self. In the cell, he been so cold, removed and frozen she had hardly been able to look at him. She had expected to find him alone the same way, but instead he looked faintly ... relieved, as if some burden had been taken away from him. He slumped as if quite relaxed in the armchair before the billowing red-gold fire, which itself laid a tawny glow over everything in the room, including Draco, turning his silver hair blond, warming his pale skin to gold.

She let the Invisibility Cloak slide down around her feet, and waited for him to see her.

He didn't. At least, he didn't seem to. He continued staring into the fire as if hypnotized. She took another step towards him, and another. She was close enough to reach out and touch his arm when he swung around, gray eyes snapping open, fixed on her face.

She held out her hand to him. "Draco?"

The glass he had been holding fell out of his fingers. It hit the floor without breaking, and rolled into the fire. Ginny stared after it, blinking, not wanting to look at his face.

He did not look glad to see her. He looked horrified. "*Ginny?*"

She could feel her heart pounding in her throat. "Are you all right?" she ventured.

He simply stared at her, still with the same stunned, frozen expression. Finally, he laughed. She was, briefly, taken aback. Surely even Draco didn't see anything funny in their current situation. "You came after me," he said, and there was now a hard edge of anger to his voice, although his mouth still smiled. "Isn't that cute. In a stupid sort of way."

She felt something inside her shrink. "You're not glad to see me."

"No. Did you really think I would be?"

She raised her chin. "Yes."

"Why? If you met your best friend in Hell, would you be pleased to see them?"

Unsure what he meant, Ginny stared at him, feeling a chill pass over her.

He stretched out a long leg, and shoved one of the smaller footstools towards her. "Well, if you aren't going to go away, why don't you sit down and have a drink with me. We can hang out. Tell jokes. Wait for the apocalypse."



"Jokes?" Ginny echoed faintly.

Draco leaned his head back against the chair. The firelight threw the hollows under his eyes into relief, the angle of his cheekbones, painting his face with its own colors of gold and darker gold. Making him almost hurtfully beautiful to look at. Certainly, something inside her hurt. "Sure. Jokes. For instance, how many Malfoys does it take to change a lightbulb?"

She stared at him as he held up a finger.

"Just one. But in the good old days, a hundred servants would change a thousand lightbulbs at our slightest whim." He grinned mirthlessly, sliding down in the chair. "One of my father's, that one. Maybe you have to be a Malfoy to think it's funny."

Ginny wrinkled up her nose. "You're drunk," she said, suspicion crystallizing into certainty.

"I am not," he said in injured tones, brushing back the silver-fair hair that was falling into his eyes. "I've only had four Mai Tais and they haven't afflicted me at all."

"You are," she snapped. "Look at you. You haven't even asked me how I got here."

"That would presuppose an alternate universe in which I cared."

"I used a Time-Turner," she said shortly. "It's a long story. We came through time into the adamantine cell to get you and Harry."

"Only," he said softly, "I wasn't in the cell."

"Oh, yes. You were."

He sat back. The lovely lazy half-lidded eyes looked up at her thoughtfully. "You were there? Just now?"

She nodded.

"You said *we*," he remarked. It was a question.

"I came with Ron. And - Hermione," she added, a bit reluctantly, knowing the effect this might have on him. She saw the pupils of his eyes dilate slightly, his hand tensing on the edge of the chair. But other than that, his reaction was minimal. "We were under the Invisibility Cloak."

"Really." There was a secretive faintly wicked inner brilliance to his eyes that unnerved her. "An invisible peanut gallery. And I never guessed. I must have looked fairly stupid to you."

"No." She suppressed a shudder. "Stupid? You didn't look that."

"So you came to rescue Harry," he said, flatly. "Why aren't you busy rescuing? What is this? Coffee break? Thought you'd come by and say hello?"

"We came to rescue *both* of you."

"But as you see," and he leaned back, managing to indicate with a single compact gesture of his hand the room, the fire, the empty glasses on the table, "I don't need to be rescued. I'm just fine."

"Just fine? You do not seem just fine to me."

He sat forward with a sudden violence that surprised her. "Were you *watching*, back there in the cell? Did you see me?"

"I saw you."

"Did you see me slice up Harry? Your beloved Harry, who you've had a crush on for six years now? Did you hear what I said to him?"

Ginny's voice was steady. "I saw you cut him by accident. I saw you say a lot of things you didn't mean."

"How do you know I didn't mean them?"

"I just know." This, she knew, sounded unconvincing. She raised her

chin defiantly. "I know more about Dark magic than you think I do. I can sense when people aren't acting of their own free will. You weren't."

"Wasn't I?"

"Why do you keep answering me with questions?"

"Am I answering you with questions?"

"Now you're just trying to annoy me," she snapped, irritably.

"Yes, I am," he said. "And behold my success."

She glared at him. He had sunk farther into the depths of the armchair, and was regarding her with a weary, irritable expression.

"It's easy to annoy me," she said. "Too easy for you. Like pulling the wings off flies. A bit like what you were doing to Harry, back in the cell."

Now he looked away.

"I figured it was all part of some bigger plan for you," she went on. "I could tell you were acting. But you don't seem to have much of a plan. Unless full-time sulking factors into it somehow."

"My current plan is to get very drunk and wait to see if Harry decides to kill me. So far I have, but he hasn't. If that makes sense."

Ginny understood only part of this diatribe. She made a face. "That's your plan? That's pathetic."

His eyes sparked again, this time with more energy than he had displayed during the course of their entire interaction. He got to his feet, swaying only very slightly as he did so. He might be drunk, but he didn't show it the way, for instance, Fred and George did when they crept home after drinking several bottles of Ogden's Old Firewhiskey. He seemed to be articulating his words even more precisely, constraining himself even more tightly than he usually

did.

"I'm pathetic?" he said, his voice soft and dangerous. "I wouldn't start that competition, Ginny. Not if I was you." He took another step closer to her, and reached out to touch her hair, winding a loose tendril around his fingers. "What did you think was going to happen when you saw me, Ginny? Did you think I'd fall into your arms, follow you home like a rescued puppy? Did you think I'd be grateful?" His hand left her hair, and touched her cheek, and shocks ran through her skin like lightning. Up close, she could smell the alcohol he had been drinking, laid over the smell of him that she remembered: spice and leather and smoke from the fire. "Maybe you have less imagination than I thought."

She heard her brother's voice in her head. *It takes imagination to credit you with having a soul in the first place, Malfoy.*

"I don't understand," she said. She pulled away from him, from his touch, and turned her back. It was easier when she couldn't see his face, and she didn't want him to see the tears in her eyes. "Are you saying you won't come with me? I have the Invisibility Cloak - it won't be dangerous - "

"*Dangerous*," he spat. She shuddered, unable to see him she could still visualize the look on his face, his anger. "Is that what you think this is? Cowardice?"

"That's what it looks like."

For a moment he was silent, and she nearly turned around. Then she felt his hands close about her upper arms, and he pulled her back against him. She felt the muscles of his chest and shoulders pressing into her back, and blades ran through her nerves where he touched her. "Let me tell you something," he hissed into her ear. "*You don't know me*. You think you do, but you don't. You don't understand what I really am."

"And you do?"

"Damn right I do. I've seen it. You've heard of the Mirror of Erised?"

Well, Slytherin's got another mirror just like it. Only this one doesn't show you what you want. *It shows you what you really are.*" He took Ginny by the shoulders, and spun her around in his arms. She stumbled backwards, and he followed her until she was backed up against the wall, Draco standing over her, still so close to her that she could feel his breath stirring her hair. "Would you want to see what I really am, Ginny? Is that something you think would interest you?"

She spun around in his arms and met his eyes with her own steady gaze. "I don't think it would be that bad."

He laughed, a laugh that snapped in the middle, as brittle as an icicle. "You know what I saw in that mirror?"

She shook her head. Her breath had gone out of her, but her eyes begged him. *Tell me.*

"I saw my family. I looked in that mirror and I saw my father looking back, and his hands were covered in blood and standing behind him were generations of Malfoys, stretching back to Slytherin, who made us what we are, and all their faces were like the faces of devils. And I knew - that's what I am. All those generations of evil have left their stain on me. Even if they aren't my actions, it's in my blood: dark wizardry, murder, necromancy. The blood of innocent people is on my hands. Everything good that I have ever done has been a lie -"

"No!" She placed the palms of her hands flat against his chest, and stared at him, trying desperately to communicate some of the intensity of what she was feeling. "That's not true! You're not responsible for other people's actions. Just being what you are - even if you are the Heir of Slytherin - that doesn't make you evil."

"It does in my eyes," said Draco, his voice very bitter. "It does in Harry's eyes, and Hermione's eyes. It does in the eyes of everyone *with* eyes. That's exactly what it makes me."

Ginny shook her head. "It's not what you are that matters. It's what you *do*, what you've done. Haven't you done enough - haven't you

proved you aren't like your father? Didn't you stand up to him, didn't you save Hermione's life, just like Harry would have--"

"Oh, bloody *Harry!*" he yelled suddenly. He was paper-white with rage, his eyes blazing with a gray and stellar fire that was frightening to see. He so rarely yelled that this was, in fact, alarming as well. "I'm not Harry! I will never be Harry! If I ever acted like him, it was only because of a spell. Can't you get that through your head?"

"*Listen to me.* Every bit of goodness in you does *not* come from Harry. If you don't believe yourself, believe me. I can *feel* evil in people. I felt it in Slytherin when he came into our house. I never felt it from you. You've often been a hateful, miserable git, but you were never evil. So you can just...*stop*. Stop with this whole "I'm the Dark Prince of Evil" business. Because you aren't. You're just a person, Draco Malfoy, just a person like anyone else. And your problem isn't that you're evil. It's that you're scared. You're always running away. You ran away from the Manor when you thought Harry and the rest of them didn't trust you any more, and then you ran away from me when I told you to go home. You even ran away from Snape. You kept the sword because it gave you a reason to run away from Harry and Hermione and all the things in your life you can't face, and then you tried to run away from the darkness it conjured up but you can't, and all you're doing is running away from yourself and falling farther and farther away from anyone who could help you. You *had* what you wanted, you know? A family, people who cared about you. And you ran away from it! 'Oh, I've got to go, I'm a danger to everyone else, I'm so evil, somebody smash me in the head already, blah blah blah.' What a bunch of self-indulgent crap!" She poked him hard in the chest with her finger, and he actually goggled at her in astonishment. "Who says you have to sit here while these huge events you're so excited about blow up all around you? Why don't you *fight*? Because I don't know about you, but I'd rather make a mistake and do something than be frightened into doing nothing!"

She caught herself up short, gasping as if she'd run a marathon. What on earth had she just said? She'd been shouting - at Draco - her ears were still ringing. Astonished, she raised her face slowly

and saw him, looking down at her, the oddest sort of expression in his eyes. "Draco--" her voice cracked. "I´m so--"

--*Sorry*, she was about to say, but before she had a chance to say the word, before she had barely a chance even to think it, Draco caught her by the arms, pulled her forward, and kissed her hard.





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It was nothing like the brief and icy kiss they had shared in her bedroom. Possibly from their proximity to the fire, possibly from the alcohol in his blood, possibly from something else altogether, his skin was no longer cold, but the temperature of her own burning blood. She felt the heat of his hands on her shoulders, scorching as his fingers ran down her back, burning through her dress. Her insides seemed to liquefy, transforming into molten metal, and the heat ran through and through her, scorching her veins, turning her bones to glass.

When he lifted his mouth off hers she felt lost, and caught at him, a short involuntary clasp at his shirt, but he had only moved to pull her closer (although, she thought, surely they couldn't get any closer, it felt to her already as if every inch of their bodies was touching) and his hand slid somehow into the nonexistent space between them and began to fumble with the fastenings of her clothes. It was a very slight fumble, but noticeable, and rather endearing. It meant he was nervous. *Good. So he should be.*

That made her giggle. She let go of his shirt and giggled helplessly against his mouth, leaning into him. He pulled back a fraction, and the gray eyes looked down at her, half-lidded and sleepy and curious. "Nobody I've kissed has ever laughed at me before," he said, amused.

Ginny couldn't answer. She was still spluttering. It wasn't that funny, and yet she couldn't quite stop giggling. *Nerves*, she thought to herself. *Do shut up.* But it was no use.

"Let's see how long you can keep that up if I do *this*," he said, with a wicked sort of smirk, and his mouth went to her ear, and did something very interesting there that made her knees turn to water. Oh dear. Now she felt as if she were going to faint. His lips traveled down to her throat, and did something there that was even more interesting and she found that she wasn't giggling any more, only clutching at him, her hands winding into his hair, which was impossibly fine and delicate and soft, as his mouth moved back up

to hers, and all thought dissolved, or at least all ability to separate thoughts into cogent threads of consciousness. All that mattered was his mouth on hers, his heart pounding against her own, and she wanted to drown in it, wanted to drown in him, in the hard grip of his arms on her back, the softness of his mouth, the pressure of his body ---

"Ow long are you two planning to continue with this?" came an irritable voice from the vicinity of the bed. "Because I was trying to sleep through it, but quite 'onestly, you are making a great deal of noise and it is very embarrassing."

Ginny felt as if someone had just doused her with an enormous bucket of ice-cold water. She leaped back from Draco with a little scream, and whipped around.

Fleur Delacour was sitting up in the bed, the blankets tangled around her waist, although one long slender leg was visible poking out from beneath them. She wore a luminous white nightgown that had slipped partially off her shoulders, and her silver hair showered down around her like a sheet of sparkling glass. She looked astoundingly beautiful and Ginny loathed her with a passion so intense she found herself completely unable to say anything. Instead, she just gaped.

Draco of course was under no such restriction. "Bugger," he said, with feeling. "Fleur. I'd forgotten all about you."

"That much," said Fleur, looking imperious, "was obvious."

Draco shook his head. Looking at him, Ginny was startled to realize she had managed to get more of his clothes off than she thought. His shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, a fact which didn't seem to bother him at all as he stood there, gazing at Fleur irritably. "Well, you should have said something," he snapped.

"Like what? "*Voila!*" Please. You were busy." Fleur swung her leg back and forth impatiently and the tiny silver chain around her delicate ankle glimmered in the firelight. "I thought you were partial to brunettes, Draco," she added with a glimmer of a smirk. "This is a

fascinating new development. She does have the cutest little freckles. But," and she opened her eyes very wide, "Can she make you go Boom?"

Ginny had had enough. She rounded on Fleur. "You will not talk about me like I´m not here!"

Fleur narrowed her beautiful eyes. "I am sorry," she purred, in a voice so syrupy you could have poured it on a waffle. "I think I 'ave forgotten your name."

"Oh!" Ginny gave a little gasp of indignation. "Of course you have. You only dated my older brother Bill for *two straight years*! You blonde French tart!"

Now it was Fleur´ s turn to give a little gasp of surprise. "I am not!"

"Not what? Not actually a blonde? *There´ s* a shocker."

There was a faint sound from the corner. Ginny realized it was Draco, choking down a laugh, and rounded on him. "Tell me right now," she demanded, pointing her finger stiffly in Fleur´ s direction, "What is she doing in your bed?"

Draco wiped the smirk off his face, but his eyes were dancing. "Well, at the moment she just appears to be sitting there. Why? What does it look like to you?"

"To me," said Ginny between clenched teeth, "it looks like you´ ve been having it off with Mademoiselle Yo-Yo Knickers over here. Which is fine, of course. You can do whatever you like. But you could have at least *told me we had an audience*!" These last words came on a high-pitched scream.

Draco seemed unperturbed. He had set to work buttoning his shirt in a leisurely fashion. "I forgot," he said.

"You *forgot*?"

He shrugged. "I forgot."

"I *hate* you," she said.

"No you don't," he said, and smirked the cocky smirk that previously, she had wanted to hit.

She pointed her wand at him instead. "*Sobrietus!*" she snapped.

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Flying seemed to calm the anxious Buckbeak. Having taken off into the air, he seemed able to ignore the presence of Lupin on his back, and responded to Sirius' reassuring caresses with faint clucks that could only be interpreted as affectionate.

He tensed again, however, when they reached a dark stretch of forest. Lupin took a deep breath. The sight of the forest stirred within him memories of being Called; memories that weren't really memories at all, but more primal than that. He *knew* the forest, knew the paths through it, *knew*, as he reached forward to tap Sirius on the shoulder, where they needed to descend to find the gray-towered castle surrounded by thickly leaved trees.

Chirruping with anxiety, Buckbeak allowed himself to be encouraged to land just inside the walls that surrounded the castle. As soon as Sirius and Lupin had been dismounted, he took off again into the air, wings pumping vigorously as he vanished over the treetops. Sirius smiled wryly and touched the copper whistle around his neck. "I guess he doesn't much like this place, either."

Lupin turned his attention to their surroundings. They were standing just inside the high gray walls that surrounded Slytherin's castle. Without ever having been there before, Lupin had felt a stabbing sense of recognition as they approached, as if he revisited a location previously seen in a dream. The high walls were familiar, as was the overgrown garden that surrounded the castle proper. The sky overhead was pearl-blue, streaked with the faint violet afterimages of sunset.

Sirius tipped his head back and glanced around. "So what do we do

now?"

Lupin shrugged. "This is as much outside my experience as it is yours. Why ask me?"

"Because. You're a problem solver. You're one of these people who will pick up a garden hose that's gotten all tangled up and spend an entire day untangling it. You like this sort of thing."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"I do not."

"Yes, you do. Sometimes I try to picture you sitting on a beach with absolutely nothing to do."

"And?"

"And, the picture always ends with your head exploding."

Lupin threw up his hands. "I wish you didn't know me so well."

"We're old souls. Get used to it," Sirius grinned.

"I was only saying." Lupin returned his attention to the castle and its environs. The black walls were smooth and towered above them, the few visible windows so very high up that there was no chance of climbing up to them. The only entrance he could see into the structure was the set of huge, intricately carved bronze front doors. "Sirius. How are we going to get in? We can't just walk up to the front door and knock."

"Oh, yeah?"

Lupin glanced at him. Sirius had that *look* in his eye. That "Who says I can't ride my motorcycle on school grounds?" look. That "Who says I can't rappel down the side of the Astronomy Tower using Toothflossing Stringmints?" look. That "Who says I can't walk

right up to the front door and knock?" look.

Sirius walked up to the front door, and knocked.

Lupin raced after him. He wasn't sure exactly why, but he'd had some practice in preventing Sirius from getting killed before. If necessary, he felt he could do it again.

The door swung open, without the loud ominous creaking one might have expected from such a very imposing-looking entrance. A tall, hooded creature stood in the entrance, swathed in long gray robes.

Lupin saw Sirius go white, before apparently realizing that it was not, in fact a dementor. It wasn't tall enough, and the hands that reached from the sleeves of its gray robes were long and spatulated, not scabbed and rotting. "I am the Guardian of the Door," it said importantly, straightening its narrow shoulders. "What do you want?"

He opened his mouth to say something, but Lupin cut him off.

"I'm Remus Lupin," he said. "I'm a werewolf, and it's, er my first time here." He paused. "I was Called here," he added, as clarification.

"Yes, very interesting." The creature waved a long, grayish hand at them irritably. "Didn't you read the sign?"

Lupin and Sirius craned their necks to look where it indicated. A bronze plaque was affixed to the stone wall, to the left of the door. It read *Dark Creatures Being Called: Please Use Side Entrance*.

"Oh," said Lupin, grabbing at Sirius' arm, and dragging him back from the door. "Sorry. We'll go around the side."

"See that you do," sniffed the creature, and slammed the doors shut.

The side entrance was much more modest. A tall, arched doorway with an intricately carved architrave was half-hidden by vines and creepers. Sirius pushed them aside and knocked.

A moment later, the door was opened by a tall woman in the long gray robes that seemed to be the uniform of Slytherin's minions. However, hers were much more tight-fitting, showing off an impressive hourglass figure. She was quite tall, nearly as tall as Sirius, and long, sheet-straight black hair fountained down around her, reaching past her waist to her knees. Her eyes were large and very dark, her lips blood-red, her teeth white and even. She smiled when she saw Lupin and Sirius. "Well, hello there," she purred. "Did you just come by to say hello, or have the man-eating trolls finally found a restaurant that delivers?"

Sirius seemed to be busy putting his eyes back in, and had nothing to say. Lupin shouldered him aside. "I'm Remus Lupin; I'm a werewolf," he said. "I'm answering the Call."

She raised two delicate dark eyebrows curiously. "Most of the werewolves arrived days ago," she pointed out.

"I got sidetracked."

"Sidetracked?"

"Sidetracked," repeated Lupin firmly. "Are you the Guardian here? Is there someone we should be speaking to?"

"You can speak to me. I'm on watch. My name is Raven." There was a bright spark that might have been suspicion, or could have been something else, as she ran her gaze over Lupin, and turned to Sirius. "And you are?"

"I'm -- " Sirius began.

"He's a vampire," said Lupin quickly. "It took us a while to get here because we could, uh, only travel at night."

She looked at Sirius with interest. "You're a vampire?"

"He's called William the Bloody," said Lupin, embroidering. "He's quite well-known for his viciousness and his, um...bloodthirstiness."

"Both of you are Human-Born? That's unusual. And a vampire and a werewolf travelling together...well, I suppose you could keep a lookout for crosses and stakes and he could protect you from silver. Still, it seems impractical." She leaned against the door jamb, inhaling with great effect. "Does your vampire friend talk? Because I have to ask you both the Questions."

"The Questions?" Sirius echoed, snapping to life.

"There are three. The first would be 'What manner of Dark creature are you?' but I guess you've already answered that. Then there's 'Have you come here to be cleansed?'"

"Cleansed?" echoed Lupin, briefly thrown off.

"Your souls must be cleansed," said Raven severely.

"Sure they must," said Sirius. "I've been thinking lately that I need a good soul-cleansing. I've been having impure thoughts like you wouldn't *believe*. Really lurid stuff. There was this one dream I had, where I was dancing with a bunch of house-elves in luminous tights \_"

"Your souls must be cleansed of *humanity*," corrected Raven, staring at Sirius as if he'd come from another planet.

Lupin stepped in front of him. "Vampire humor," he said hastily. "He had some bad blood in the Netherlands. He's been a little off since then."

She raised her eyebrows high. "And are you willing to accept the Snake Lord as your master and acknowledge the superiority of pure wizarding blood?"

Lupin clamped a hand firmly on Sirius's wrist. "We are," he announced.

Without saying anything, she leaned back against the open door, creating enough space of them to pass, although not quite enough



space for them to pass without brushing against her. Once they were inside, she shut the door behind them and picked up a small lantern which glowed with an intense blue light. "Follow me," she said, and started off down the hall.

"What is she?" Sirius whispered to Lupin as they followed the rather mesmerizing sway of Raven's hips down the hallway. "A veela? No...she's too dark."

"I'd guess she's a banshee," Lupin whispered back. "And have I mentioned that when there are pretty girls around, you suck at undercover? Now shut up."

Raven slowed down a little as they turned a corner, allowing them to catch up to her. Lupin glanced around with great interest. So *this* was the stronghold of Salazar Slytherin, one of the greatest Dark wizards who had ever lived, who had inspired so many imitators, like Grindelwald, Voldemort and Steve The Third, who wasn't as successful at evil as the others, but had written some very famous self-help books. The walls were ancient stone that bore the marks of the tools used to hollow out a passageway, the ceilings beamed in dark and heavy wood. Everywhere there were serpents - not live snakes, but a clear reptilian motif: carved snakes writhed up and down the architraves, were mosaiced into the floor, adorned the gleaming bronze torch brackets. It was actually quite warm inside the castle - fires were lit in almost every room, flaring and fading as they passed, some of them large as bonfires. *Warm enough for cold-blooded creatures*, Lupin thought.

They turned another corner. Raven was looking at Sirius again. "We'll have to keep you away from the veelas," she said, cheerfully. "They'll just eat you up. Not literally, of course. Well, not most of them."

Sirius looked alarmed. "Why me particularly?"

Raven poked him gently with her index finger. "Come on. Have you looked in a mirror lately? Oh. Well, no, I guess you wouldn't have, being a vampire and all. But they do like good-looking dark-haired men."

Sirius grinned. "I´ll have you know my friend Remus here has been quite a hit with the veelas back where we come from."

Raven looked disapproving. "Veela-werewolf relationships never work out," she said to Sirius in a stage whisper. "Although they do have the cutest little wereveela babies. Oh look, we´re here."

She paused in front of a large ivory door - or at least, Lupin would have thought it was ivory if any creature alive was large enough to yield such unbroken sheets of whiteness. He blinked, and the door swung partly open under Raven´s touch. She glanced at him. "You go here, for the Testing."

"But--" he turned to look at Sirius.

Raven looked annoyed. "What is it with you two? Can´t you be separated for a minute?" she snapped. "We are segregated here - werewolves separated from veelas, banshees separated from trolls. Unless you really want to bunk with the dementors?"

Lupin glanced towards the half-open door. "That room is full of werewolves?" he demanded, wondering if this meant, by extension, that Sirius would soon have to cope with a room full of vampires.

"You say that like it´s a bad thing," said Raven, and prodded him inside. He barely had a chance to glance at Sirius before the door shut between them, cutting his friend off from view.

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Draco sat down very hard in the chair by the fire and clutched at his head. The faint blurring of his vision and the pleasant sensation of drifting were gone, replaced by a pain that felt as if a small mountain troll had taken up residence in his head and had just decided to add on a second story and perhaps a nice bay window. "Owww," he said, gingerly touching his face and looking at Ginny accusingly. "Why´d you do that?"

"You were drunk," she said severely, putting her wand away in her

pocket. Anger was rising off her in shimmering waves like the heat from a mirage; her small, freckled face was glowing pink and her round lower lip was trembling.

"I must have been," he said shortly, thinking that he had to have been quite drunk to forget that Fleur was still asleep in the bed.

Ginny's face crumpled. Draco looked at her in surprise for a moment, before realizing how what he said must have sounded. He bolted to his feet, forgetting the pain in his head. "Ginny--"

"Shut up." She jerked away from his reaching hand, her eyes suspiciously bright. "Don't touch me."

Draco threw up his hands in exasperation. "Look--"

But at that moment Fleur created a disturbance by suddenly, without so much as a sound, falling off the bed in a dead faint.

Draco darted forward just in time to keep her head from hitting the stone floor. He caught her up in his arms, deposited her back on the mattress, and bent over her, his heart hammering unpleasantly. "Fleur?"

Her head rolled back on his arm, her eyes still closed, their lids bluish.

"Fleur!" He touched the back of his hand to her forehead, found it cold and clammy. At least she was still breathing, her chest falling in a rapid, shallow motions.

A second later Ginny was at his side, pushing him away. She bent over Fleur with her wand, whispering something Draco couldn't hear. There was a bright flash of light, and Fleur jumped, her eyes flying open. Ginny stood up and backed away as Fleur's eyes filled with tears.

"What 'as happened?" she demanded, struggling to sit up.

Somewhat reluctantly, Draco leaned forward to help her into a

sitting position. He could feel Ginny's gaze on them both. "You fainted," he said.

She reached out and clutched at him. *I'm dying.*

Draco jerked back. *What are you doing? He can hear us.*

*Draco. No. He can't. He doesn't have his full powers yet - won't have them until the Orb is opened. He cannot hear you talking to me, or to Harry. I know you don't want to believe me, but please, if you have any trust left in you at all - please believe this.*

He believed her. For the first time since he had realized her betrayal of them, he believed her, not lastly because he knew that nobody could lie while they spoke this way. He was aware of Ginny looking daggers at them both, and knew it must look like he and Fleur were gazing silently into each other's eyes. Couldn't be helped, though.

*I can help you,* said Fleur. *Please let me. I want to. I know things. I can tell you -*

She broke off, and, as she looked over Draco's shoulder, her eyes widened. He whipped around to see what she was staring at, and saw that the door to the bedchamber was open, and one of Slytherin's servants was standing there, gaunt and silent in gray, hooded robes.

He spun around immediately, his heart hammering against his ribcage - but Ginny was gone. She must have concealed herself with the Cloak. Clever girl.

He raised his head, and straightened up, drawing arrogance and poise around himself like a cloak of his own. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the servant. "What are you doing here?"

"I come with a message," said the servant, gazing at Draco.

"I'd really rather have some more Mai Tais," said Draco.

"The Snake Lord says you are to have no more beverages," said the

servant in humorless tones. "He wishes to see you. I am to bring you. Come."

Draco glanced back at Fleur, and the blank space that was (hopefully) Ginny. He reached down and grabbed his cloak up off the floor. "All right. Let's go."

The servant led Draco to a room he had not seen before. It was high-ceilinged, and the walls seemed to have been hollowed out of one giant block of stone. There were no windows, and the walls were lined with shelves holding books and a variety of magical and beautiful objects. There seemed no reason behind their selection or the design of the room. Grimoires of Dark Magic sat side by side with books on household charms and spells. An Egyptian cat of clean and elongated lines contrasted with an ornate red, black and gold Russian icon. A miniature painting of a knight on horseback hung above the desk where Slytherin sat, his hands crossed in front of him. He sat in shadow, so that Draco could barely see his face.

The servant let himself silently out, closing the door behind him. Draco came to stand in front of the desk, his hands in his pockets, feeling awkward. His head was pounding rhythmically. "You wanted to see me?"

Slytherin looked up at him, and didn't smile. Not that Draco would have expected him to. "I did."

"Why?" said Draco, feeling suddenly twelve.

"Why do you think?"

Draco hesitated. "Look," he said finally. "You don't ask me a question unless you already know the answer. So let's just pretend you asked me, I didn't know the answer so I lied, you caught me, you told me off, and now we can cut right to the point. Why did you want to see me?"

"Do you ever worry," said Slytherin, pushing his chair back from the desk and standing, "that with such a sharp wit, you will one day cut yourself on its edge?"

"I have enough to do worrying about being cut up by *real* sharp edges, thanks."

Slytherin got up from his desk and walked around to stand by Draco. Draco flinched back as Slytherin's hand came up and landed on his shoulder. "Come over here by the light," said the Snake Lord, and Draco followed him reluctantly to the fire, where Slytherin stopped, his hands on Draco's shoulders. "Raise your eyes to me," he said.

Draco raised his eyes, and saw, with a dread near to revulsion, his own face reflected in Slytherin's eyes, inches away. The Snake Lord held him there like that for a moment, searching Draco's face with his eyes. Draco glanced away, desperate to look at anything else, and his gaze swept over Slytherin's desk. There were heaps of blank parchment there, stacks of Dark Magic books, and next to the books...

A wave of nausea washed over him. In between one stack of books and another, lay a sword. Or, part of a sword. The blade, to be precise. Long and shimmering, the color of moonlight on water, as long as the blade of Draco's sword and with the same groove running down the middle. Only this sword didn't end in a hilt. It ended in a lump of bloody tissue that was only somewhat recognizable as a section of a human wrist.

Without being able to help it, a gagging sound escaped from his throat.

Slytherin turned and looked over his shoulder. His eyes lit on the blade, and he smiled. "You recognize that," he said.

Draco nodded reluctantly. "Last time I saw it, it was part of Wormtail."

"The Living Blade turned out to be more useful than the servant it was attached to," said Slytherin, reaching out to run a hand along the blade. He lifted it briefly, watching the light run down its surface like water, then put it down. "Do you know, Draco, how a Living

Blade is made?"

Draco shook his head. "No, but I have a feeling you´re going to tell me."

"Even I do not know all the secrets of fashioning such an item. But I know that the blades, after cooling, are thrice-washed, in the tears of a phoenix, in human blood, and then in the blood of unicorns."

Draco felt himself jerk so violently that he almost expected his heart to stop. Slytherin´s eyes fastened on him again.

"You don´t like that," he said. "What part of it? The unicorn blood? Unicorn blood is very useful. It can prolong life, even save it."

"Then why don´t you give some to Fleur?" said Draco, between his teeth.

"The time will come soon when I no longer need her," said Slytherin.

"And will there be a time when you no longer need me?"

"That depends on you. What have you being doing lately, Draco? Sulking in your room and drinking enough for a regiment, at least according to your servant. You seem to be able to hold your liquor, which is certainly an estimable quality, but not what I was looking for when I made you the general of my armies."

"What *were* you looking for? I haven´t got any experience to speak of. I haven´t even got any experience *not* to speak of."

For a moment Slytherin just looked at him, steadily. He did not seem angry, which was something of a change of pace. "When I was your age, I was eager to experience battle. I assumed you also would want to see how a war was fought, very badly."

Draco refrained from replying that if Slytherin's plan was to fight a war very badly, then he couldn't see why the Snake Lord had any use for a general in the first place. "It's just..."

"It's just what?"

"The world isn't like it was when you were...first alive. There are different weapons, different laws, even magic has evolved, changed -"  
He broke off, not sure why on earth he was telling Slytherin this.

"I count upon that," said Slytherin, nodding. "They have forgotten me. I am a legend now, not real, not a threat. When I fall upon them with my army, they will have no means with which to resist me. It will make my earlier accomplishments pale by comparison. Those like you and will live forever. And the thousands who were murdered to buy that immortality will be a testament to our greatness."

"Murder. You say it like it's nothing."

"Muggles. Mudbloods. Those who resist. Only they will die."

"Everyone will resist. It's not like it was in the old days. Nobody in the wizarding world expects to be *ruled*. Not anymore."

"If everyone resists, everyone dies."

"Why don't you just kill me?" Draco demanded, raising his chin.  
"What do you need me for that you have to keep me alive when you know -"

"That you aren't to be trusted? You cannot fight me. It would be impossible."

*"What do you need me for?"*

"The Prophecy states that I shall rise to power with my descendant at my side, and that together we will bring destruction and chaos to the wizarding world. Now, prophecies are not immutable. I know that. But when I built the line that resulted in your birth, mixing my blood with the blood of creatures I fabricated out of elements of dark magic, I created something unique. I had always intended this moment. When I have opened the Orb, when the bargain is fulfilled, then I will make you my Source. And when that happens, I will



command such powers, I will do such things, that I will be the terror of the earth."

Slytherin's eyes were glowing with a weird black light. Draco almost couldn't bear to look at him. "Aren't you afraid?" Draco asked, his voice unsteady.

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know." Draco looked down at his shoes. "Retribution."

"No." Slytherin said. "I am afraid of nothing."

"No one is afraid of nothing. There must be something..." Draco said, not impressed, but horrified. To lack fear in such a degree seemed to him an entirely inhuman quality, like lacking a capacity for wonderment or surprise.

"No. Fear is born from caring. I care for nothing."

"Have you never loved anything?"

"No. I have never loved anything. Even Rowena was only a part of myself." He turned his eyes on Draco. They shone in the darkness like a cat's. "Love is a sickness. Cure yourself, or I will cure you."

Draco looked down at the floor, a finger of cold sliding up his spine. *Love is a sickness.* He had thought that himself, lying awake at night in the Slytherin dungeon those last weeks of school, staring up at the ceiling, feeling as if a heavy weight were pressing against his chest. Wondering if it was possible to feel so terrible and continue living. Guilty that thoughts of losing Hermione actually crowded out the thoughts of his father behind bars, which was what he should have been thinking about, but couldn't. Knowing that he was being stupid, childish, that people loved in their lives over and over, their hearts broken and reformed, yet afraid anyway that he would be the exception, that he, of all people, might have finally encountered something he could not buy or ignore or ridicule away, that something had actually happened to him from which he would never recover. And they had not gone away, those feelings. That he

knew now that part of this had to do with Slytherin's rising, that some of the emotions that surged and broke inside him had their birth in a bloody thousand-year-old history, almost didn't matter.

Reality came to him with a jolt, and he started, alarmed that Slytherin had said *anything* that struck a chord in him. He swallowed hard, and glanced up. And saw that the door to the room was open, and a servant was standing there, speaking with Slytherin. Apparently he had been there for a few moments at least, for they appeared to be in the middle of a discourse.

"--finished testing the blood you gave us, Master," the creature was saying. "It is clean of charms and spells, although our results are not without interest. Would you like to come and see?"

Slytherin nodded. "Yes, I would." He turned to Draco. "Wait here for me."

Once Slytherin was gone, Draco was able to relax very slightly. He began to examine the shelves of books, arranged in no particular order, most of which seemed to deal with the Dark Arts. Slytherin had copies of *Epicyclical Elaborations of Sorcery*, *The Necronomicon*, *How to Raise Demons and the Dead*, and something called *The Handbook for Evil Overlords*, which didn't look as if it had been read much. At random, Draco picked up a book entitled *The Dragon Glass*, which fell open to an illustration of red dragons in flight. He had just begun to skim it when the door behind him opened with a soft click, and someone poked their head into the room.

He turned and blinked. There was a woman standing in the doorway; one he recognized from his tour of the armies the previous day. Long, dark hair and an impressive figure, and the telltale upswept black eyes of a banshee. "Raven," he said slowly, plucking her name from some recess of memory. "What is it?"

She straightened up, and walked into the room, trailed by a tall man in a black travelling cloak, who Draco recognized instantly and with an enormous, boiling shock, as Sirius.

He barely heard Raven speaking, saying that two of the Called had arrived that morning, one of whom, a werewolf, had been sorted in with the other lycanthropes, but that this one was a vampire and that consequently there was no place for him. "We just don't have any other vampires," she sighed, looking exasperated.

"Alphabetically, I could put him with the veelas, but I don't think that's such a good idea, do you?"

Draco tried to find his voice, which had temporarily deserted him. He was staring at Sirius, who he could tell was as shocked as he was, although he was doing an excellent job of hiding it. All those years of Auror training, no doubt. "Leave him here with me," he said finally, his voice coming out slightly shrill.

Raven blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"I said leave him here. I want to ask him something."

"But, Master -"

*"I said leave him!"*

She jumped in surprise, then nodded, and left, quietly shutting the door behind her. Heart pounding like a jackhammer against his ribs, Draco turned to face Sirius.

\*\*\*

Ginny watched as Fleur slowly sat up in bed. She was paper-white and her breathing was just beginning to steady, but she seemed to be improving. She glanced over at where Ginny stood, wrapped in the Invisibility Cloak.

"It is very rude to be invisible when people know you are there," she said coolly.

Ginny let the cloak slide down to her feet and glared. "It is very rude to pretend you don't know people's names when you perfectly well do," she snapped.

Fleur suddenly smiled. "It 'as been nearly two years since I last saw you," she said. "You 'ave changed. A great deal."

Ginny hesitated, not sure if this was going to turn into a compliment or an insult.

"The Ginny Weasley I knew would not 'ave told off Draco Malfoy in such uncertain terms. I was...impressed."

"You were jealous," said Ginny, rather nastily.

"I was not. I was a bit afraid I was going to be treated to more of a floor show than I wanted. I am not a *voyeur*."

Ginny blushed furiously. "I wouldn't - we wouldn't have -"

Fleur leaned back on the cushions and grinned. "Are you quite sure of that?"

Ginny set her chin stubbornly. "*He* wouldn't have. He doesn't really want me."

Fleur gave an unladylike snort. "That's not what it looked like."

"He was drunk," said Ginny shortly, hating herself for the vulnerability she heard in her own voice. She deserved nothing better, she thought, for being stupid enough to get involved with Draco in the first place. Not that they were, per se, involved. For being stupid enough to allow herself to have feelings for him, then. Of course, feelings couldn't be controlled. She tried to think back - was there some particular moment that her old hatred had been swept away as if by a fire, and this new feeling had been born out of the ashes? It wasn't the same feeling she had had for Harry, comprised of sincere admiration and liking. This was more basic, primal even, as if it grew out of some very deep place in her heart that could be neither controlled, nor comprehended, nor solaced in its disappointment. To her horror, she felt tears welling up in her eyes.

Fleur reached out, and put an arm around her shoulder. "There is

no reason to cry."

Ginny opened her eyes very wide, willing the tears to go away. "You don't understand."

"I do understand," said Fleur, and patted her shoulder. "It's Draco. 'E's special."

Ginny snorted, the tears fading. "And by special you mean sexy. Don't you?"

Fleur shrugged. "That is a fact. That boy will never have to worry about being lonely. He probably gets anonymous snog sessions in the mail. He could have any girl."

Ginny smiled weakly, and poked at a pillow with the toe of her shoe. "Except the only one he really wants," she said, her voice sounding sadder than she had meant it to. "He can never have her."

Fleur looked at her closely. When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. "Draco is only sixteen," she said. "It's a little early for 'only' and 'never' and all that."

"Not if you're Draco Malfoy," said Ginny firmly. "But you probably know that."

Fleur settled back among the pillows. "We 'ave only ever kissed, and that is all."

Ginny's heart bumped against her chest, but she didn't change expression. "You mean you haven't - you didn't --?"

Fleur shook her head.

"And when did all this restraint take place?" Ginny snapped.

"It was only two kisses, and I don't think 'e wanted either of them." Fleur smiled. She had the easy confidence of a girl who knew that, for every Draco Malfoy who didn't want to kiss her, there would be ten other men who would. "'E is not an easy one, that one. 'E 'as

secrets, and much darkness; 'e could be something very special, but that is not always a lucky thing."

Ginny hesitated. She was picturing Draco now, in her head. Sometimes when she closed her eyes and visualized him, she saw Tom instead. Tom who she had never really clearly seen, only in dreamed-of diary pages, but whose face was branded into her memory. Tom with his black hair like Harry's, and his eyes as blue as her brothers', better-looking than any boy she had ever known, and more frightening for it. All that terrible beauty rotting into evil, that clever brain fermenting into a sewer, so much more horrible for everything he could have been.

She looked down. "Fleur," she said. "Why are you being nice to me? Harry told me what you did, but I can't believe - was he wrong? Did you *not* betray them?"

"It's a long story." Fleur looked away, dropping his hands into her lap. "My sister," she went on, a little haltingly. "Gabrielle."

"The youngest one? I've met her. Is she ill, or dying...?"

Fleur shook her head. "No. She was born without any magic."

"Oh." Ginny opened her mouth, then shut it again. "A Squib?"

"Yes, that's what it's called 'ere."

"Well, that's pretty terrible, but there are worse things -"

"Not in my family." Fleur shook her head. "If a child does not display some evidence of magical ability before the age of fourteen, they will be disowned from the family, sent to live in a Muggle orphanage. The child cannot inherit, and no one in the family can have contact with them any more."

Ginny stared. "That's horrible!"

"My family is just like Draco's. Very old, and proud of their wizarding blood. Squibs do not exist, and if they do 'appen, they are

made to not exist any more." Fleur's voice was bitter. "Gabrielle is very fragile. She has no magic, but she suffers from many ailments that only magic can help. It is my belief that were she abandoned to live among Muggles, she would soon die."

"Fleur..." She reached out to touch the other girl's arm, then drew back. "But I don't understand why..."

"I wanted to get a source of power," said Fleur bitterly. "I thought, if I could do that, I could channel some of it towards Gabrielle. Help her....I tried to get Professor Lupin to talk to me about it at school. He told me there are ways to transfer magic from very powerful objects to people. I tried to use the sword, but it would not let me keep it. But having it even for a short time called the Snake Lord's attention to me. He contacted me. Promised to help Gabrielle if I would agree to be his Source. He said it would be for a brief time."

"He lied, then," said Ginny.

"No. He did not lie. It will be for a brief time. I am dying." Her eyes went to Ginny's. "You understand, though? I thought I was helping my sister. You would do the same, for one of your brothers, wouldn't you?"

"I would," said Ginny softly. Then she paused. "Well. Possibly not Percy."

Fleur's smile lit up her face. She was still, even weak as she was, amazingly pretty. Ginny would have been jealous, only she felt much too awful for her to manage it.

"I understand," said Ginny, serious again. "I don't know if I would have done the same thing. I couldn't bear to do anything that would hurt Harry or Draco."

"I didn't know. I thought he wanted them only to fight the mantichore. I knew they could do it. Together, they are very powerful, much more so than they know. And Harry has killed monsters before."

Ginny shook her head. "What would Slytherin do if he could hear you saying all this?"

"Kill me, I am sure. It pains me to even say such things about him," said Fleur. "But 'e thinks I am weak. Not a danger. 'E is so powerful, so strong, you 'ave no idea what 'e is capable of. It would take an army to stand against him."

Ginny felt her heart sink - then flip. "An army?" she echoed.

"An army," said Fleur firmly. "You 'ave not seen the power 'e commands. The creatures that flock to serve 'im. There are hundreds. Thousands. And when 'e travels, more will rise and join 'im. In 'is time, he destroyed whole armies at a blow, wiped them out with lightning, drowned them in sorcerous floods. 'E once made a whole army that was rising against 'im disappear without a trace. The Ministry is not prepared for this. They cannot understand it. It is not as it was a thousand years ago, when people still believed in miracles and in true evil. They cannot be prepared for this."

"You sound as if you´re sure he´ll win," said Ginny, her voice low and steady.

"I am sure," said Fleur, looking towards the window. "I see no other way."

There was a short silence. Then Ginny got to her feet, and picked up the Invisibility Cloak, and handed it to Fleur. "When Draco gets back," she said softly. "Give this to him. Tell him to take it back to Harry."

Fleur stared. "But why? Where are you going? Don´t you need it?"

Ginny put her hand to the Time-Turner around her throat, and shook her head. "Not where I´m going, I don´t," she said.

"But what will Draco say when 'e comes back and you are gone?"

"Draco," said Ginny, with satisfaction, "will be very, very annoyed," and with that, she walked out of the room. Outside the door, she



leaned against it for a moment, looking up and down the corridor, her heart pounding. Then she glanced down at the Time-Turner, hesitated for a brief moment - and flipped it over.

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For a moment, Sirius just goggled. Then, he took a few steps forward across the room, grabbed Draco, and hugged him hard. He could feel how thin the boy had gotten, the bones of his shoulders poking through even the thick material of his silver cloak, and for just a moment, Draco returned the embrace, his hands gripping Sirius' back as tightly and awkwardly as if no one had ever hugged him before, his head buried in Sirius' shoulder.

Then he pushed him away, and took a step back, shaking his head. "Don't *do* that."

"We thought you might be *dead*," said Sirius, by way of explanation, and knowing he sounded a bit like someone's mother.

Draco grinned without mirth. "I was. I got better."

"Draco -" Sirius took another step forward when, to his everlasting astonishment, Draco reached behind him, and grabbed one of the long, tasselled spearlike weapons off the wall, and pointed it at him.

"Don't come any closer," he said.

Sirius just stared at him, his mouth open. Once again his eyes scanned the room, this time more slowly, taking in the rich tapestries, the gleam of the firelight off the weaponry, and Draco himself, all gold and silver and black, looking as much as if he belonged there as if he were a general piece of the decoration.

"What the hell," said Sirius, "is that? And why are you pointing it at me?"

Draco looked down at the metal object in his hand and shrugged. "It's a pike. Made by Giants. Strong enough to punch through a stone door. Why?"

Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Raven said I should wait here to meet with Slytherin's general. Is that..."

"You're looking at him," said Draco with a sort of desperate amusement. "Like the uniform?"

"Not really," said Sirius. "I don't like the uniform, your general attitude or the fact that you seem to be on buddy terms with Slytherin. What's *happened* to you?"

"What *hasn't* happened to me?" Draco replied sharply.

"And you smell like alcohol. Have you been drinking? You should know better."

"I should know better? What about you? What are you doing here and why the hell haven't you rescued Harry and left? Everything here is about to come crashing down. Do you even know where Harry is? Have you found him?"

Sirius held up a hand. "No. Not yet. Remus --"

"*He's* here? Hurrah for the big reunion. Did we leave anyone at home, or did everyone come to the let's-get-killed party?"

"Draco--"

Draco's voice shot up an octave. "Harry could be dead already for all you know."

"Not true." Sirius held out his arm, showing Draco the bracelet with its darkly glowing stone. "Vivicus charm," he said briefly.

A little of the tension went out of Draco's shoulders. "How did you get into the castle?"

Sirius explained, as briefly as possible. Draco's eyes crinkled in confusion. "A vampire?"

He echoed. "But the Test -"

"Yes. I heard there was a Test," said Sirius. "Raven wanted me to meet with you first."

Draco swore, at length. Sirius was impressed. He had quite a range and fluency for someone his age, not to mention a deft hand with imagery.

"That sounds like it would really hurt," he said gently, when Draco was done. "Assuming you could even get it to stretch that far."

"Shut up, Sirius. Let me think."

"I pretty much have to do whatever you want, don't I, considering you're pointing a pike at me. Is that really necessary?"

"Yes. Did you say you had Harry's Key?"

"I did."

"Give me the Key." Draco held out his hand. "Quickly."

"You know," said Sirius conversationally, "if I really wanted to, I could take that pike away from you, and break your arm."

Draco went a little paler, but kept his hand out. "I know that."

"Maybe you might want to tell me what you want with the Key, then."

Draco opened his mouth to reply - and stopped. Sirius heard the click as the door behind him began to open. And Draco swung the pike around -- so quickly that Sirius' eye barely followed its movement -- and jabbed the end of it into his arm. Sirius watched in astonishment as the blood sprang up and drenched Draco's sleeve. And Sirius stared in bewilderment, Draco, now smiling a tense and very unpleasant smile, flipped the pike around in his hand, and threw it blunt-end-first at Sirius.

Who caught it. And stood there, staring, as Raven, coming into the room at that moment, inhaled a shocked breath and scrambled for her wand. "What's going on here?"

Draco clapped a hand over his bleeding arm, and assumed a furious and injured look. "Raven," he said, pointing at Sirius. "This vampire just tried to attack me."

"*Attack* you?" echoed Raven (now holding Sirius at wandpoint) and Sirius, in unison.

"Yes. He lunged at me with that pike." Draco pointed at it, and Raven, looking ashen, Summoned it to her quickly. "It is against the Law to lay hands upon Slytherin, or by extension his Heir. Such an act is punishable by death, of course." Draco raised his chin. The light from the torches turned his hair to a rather ironic silvery halo. Sirius just stared at him. His eyes said *trust me*, but his actions said something else again.

"It could be blood sickness," Raven interrupted, looking concerned. "Vampires do get that sometimes. Makes them behave quite oddly."

"That's what I was thinking," Draco agreed smoothly. "Since there are no other vampires here we could consult, I suggest you take him down to the dungeons and keep him contained there until the sickness passes."

Draco's wince was almost imperceptible, but he ignored him.

"I'll have to take his wand from him," said Raven, her eyes bright on Sirius. "And search him."

"Do what you have to," said Draco. "Only - don't harm him."

"Of course not," said Raven. "I would leave that to you, Master."

"Thank you," said Draco, and there was a sort of desperate hysteria in his voice, although none at all in his eyes as they met Sirius' across the room. He turned his back then, and Sirius couldn't see his face as he said, "You'd better take him now, Raven. I have work

to attend to."

"Of course," said the banshee smoothly, and laid her hand on Sirius' arm. He followed her without protest.

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The door shut behind Lupin with the metallic clang of a portcullis crashing down. He coughed, and looked around a little nervously.

He was in a large, stone-arched room, whose high ceiling vanished into mist. No, he realized - it wasn't mist, it was smoke, a cloying, sweetish smoke that filled the room with vapors. He squinted around, trying to see through the dimness. The room seemed to be designed almost like an amphitheatre, with a low, central stage sunk into the floor and ringed around with long benches piled high with beaded cushions. Sprawled on the cushions were a number of figures he couldn't quite make out, although they were obviously human -

--Not human, he reminded himself. Lycanthropes; other werewolves, like me. The thought was unsettling. It had been years since he had been around other wolves in any number. Twenty-five, perhaps thirty years.

"Lo, there." A figure evolved out of the smoke at his side. A male werewolf of about twenty-five, wearing a shocking green robe and with his short hair clipped around his head called out in an American accent. "Catch."

Something flew at Lupin's face. Without thinking, he plucked it out of the air and held it for a moment - it was a wandlike object with one sharp end, the other end of which was decorated with a glass bauble of some sort. It gave off a brief flash of light when he touched it, and then went dark.

"Right, then, you're one of us," said the werewolf, plucked the wandlike thing out of Lupin's hand, and made it disappear into his robes. "That was the Test. You passed. Congratulations. What's your name?"

Lupin introduced himself, then blinked around. "Now what?"

"Bugged if I know," said the werewolf, looking gloomy.

"Well--who's in charge, here?" Lupin demanded, wondering if he could weasel a glance at their plans or their battle strategy.

"I am," replied his companion, looking even more gloom-ridden.

"And you don't...?"

"Well, look what I have to work with!" The werewolf swept an arm towards the rest of the room, which Lupin was able to see a bit more clearly now. It seemed as if there were thirty or forty werewolves in the room, all of whom were recognizable only as dim shapes sitting or lounging around on the cushions, giggling and poking each other. "Bunch of apathetic, useless, longhaired cubs," the werewolf muttered. "I tell you, all the fighting spirit's been bred out of us over the centuries. The fiercest of us were slaughtered. Look what's left. Bunch of wimps. Hey, you got anything to eat on you?"

"No," Lupin replied absently, still scanning the room. "You mean Slytherin - the Snake Lord just lets you loll about here like this, not doing anything? Where are your battle plans, your strategies?"

"I wrote a few strategic plans on the chalkboard, but nobody's paid attention. You don't have any food? Hippogriff Crunchies, maybe? Lamb Pops? Goat Crisps? Peanuts?"

"I said no." Lupin squinted down at the board at the foot of the amphitheater. It appeared to be a white chalkboard on which was written in dark green ink *Plan For World Domination*, above a few squiggles. Also, it looked like someone had been playing noughts and crosses. "And that's all you've got?"

"Pretty much. This is our War Council. I hear the trolls are a lot better organized. You really don't have any food? All we get here is hard boiled eggs. I'll take cookies."

"No, I don't have any -" Lupin checked himself, and reached into a pocket. He pulled out a handful of Every Flavor Beans in Flower Power flavors, checked to see if there were any purple ones (there were two) and deposited the lot into his companion's outstretched hand. Then he turned his attention back to the room. "This doesn't look like the setup for a War Council," he said irritably. "This looks like the setup for a poetry reading. What's the strategy? Bore the enemy to death with free prose and herbal tea?"

The werewolf chortled. "I like the way you think," he said. "How'd you like to be an admiral, or possibly a baron? You can help me whip these pups into shape. Plan strategy. What do you think?"

"I think 'admiral' is a naval term, and I'm not prepared to be a baron either. But I'll be a general."

He thrust out his hand towards the werewolf, not sure if that was proper etiquette but willing to risk it. After a moment, the other took his hand, and shook it. "General Lupin," he said. "Welcome to the war."

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Draco stood staring at the door to the bedroom, imagining Ginny and Fleur inside, waiting for him, sitting on the bed. They would ask him "What did he want? What happened?" and he'd have to tell them about Sirius and Fleur probably wouldn't care, but Ginny...Ginny would hate him even more than she did already.

He sighed and rested his head for a moment on the cool closed wood of the door. *I put my father behind bars. Maybe not directly, but I let it happen. Now I've put my stepfather in prison, and I did it with my own hand. I meant well. But does that really matter?* He heard his own voice, talking to Slytherin. *You can't do good with powers that come from Hell.*

*You can't do good.*

He pushed the door open, and walked in. He saw Fleur, sitting on the edge of the bed, and his eyes immediately flicked around the

room, searching for a sign of flame-red hair, a flash of green dress.

Nothing. She was gone.

He whirled on Fleur. "Where is she? Where did she go?"

"She didn't say." Fleur shook her head. "She just left. She even left the Invisibility Cloak 'ere for you. I'd imagine she went back to 'Arry and the others. She probably didn't want to see you, after the way you behaved."

"The way *I* behaved? Oh that's rich. Bloody bugging Hell." Draco threw himself down in a chair, glaring at her.

"It's not very nice to go around kissing people if you don't mean it," said Fleur primly.

Draco made a strangled noise. "Look who's talking."

Fleur looked martyred. "*Men*," she said.

Draco ignored this. "It's damn annoying," he said. "especially since I was hoping she'd come back with me."

"Where?"

"I've got to go talk to Harry." He started to get to his feet. "And I should do it as soon as possible."

"But the Snake Lord -"

"What he doesn't know, won't hurt him."

Fleur shook her head, looking at him. "I do not understand it," she said. "Don't you feel the pain?"

"I feel the pain of having a hangover, if that's what you mean."

Fleur sat up straighter, her shoulder set, and reached down to pull up the sleeve of her nightgown, baring her arm. Draco briefly



glimpsed the disfiguring scar of the Dark Mark burned into her creamy skin before she pulled the sleeve back down. "That does not hurt you?"

"It hurt me when he burned it into my arm. But it seems to have healed. I don't *like* it. It doesn't hurt, though."

"Well, it should," she said. "I feel it twinge every time I speak his name. Were I to act against him, as you do, the pain would be blinding. I don't understand how you do it."

"Maybe it's because you're his Source."

She shook her head. "The Mark connects us to 'im, as the Dark Creatures he commands are connected to 'im by the Call. It makes no sense. With the enchantments you have on you, and the added bond of the Dark Mark, there should be no way on earth you should be able to resist. In any way. It makes no sense at all. It should be impossible. 'E knows that. I know that."

"Could be the Will-Strengthening potion," said Draco, a little absently - but he knew it wasn't, he remembered the feeling of the potion draining away as he stood with Harry in front of the adamantine door, and then -

Fleur looked at him doubtfully. "I don't think you believe that."

"It doesn't matter what I believe," he said quickly, grabbing up the Cloak where Ginny had left it at the foot of the bed. "We don't have time for a big ontological study of what's going on with me. I've got to get to Harry and the others."

"What's happening to -"

"No," he said, sharply, and saw her flinch. "You'll forgive me," he added, a little acidly, "if I don't tell you all my plans in detail quite yet. You're not exactly back on my good side."

He was at the door when Fleur spoke again.

"Be safe," she said.

He looked back at her, nodded, and went out.

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"Two hours," said Ron.

It was the first thing he had said almost since they had realized Ginny was gone. He had come back to sit with Harry and Hermione at least; they sat in a line against the wall, Harry in the middle, with Hermione on one side and Ron on the other, all their shoulders touching. She could sense that Harry was happy to have Ron back with them, even if he was subdued and quiet. Harry was always a slightly different person when Ron was there, and certainly a happier one; Ron's presence allowed him to make a certain kind of peace with the world around him that nothing else quite seemed to provide.

"She'll be back," said Harry, his chains rattling as he touched Ron's shoulder. "Look, it's not your fault."

"Of course it isn't. It's Malfoy's fault."

"That's the spirit," said Harry, with a half-smile.

Ron just shook his head, leaning it back against the wall. As he did so, Hermione noticed something peculiar. She leaned forward, blinking, and then reached across Harry to touch Ron on the shoulder. He looked over at her, and she saw it again -- there was a mark on the side of his temple, just above and to the side of his eyebrow, a faint, silvery mark just where Rowena had kissed him. It looked almost like the scar of a years-healed burn, only she knew that Ron hadn't had such a mark that morning. "Ron," she said slowly. "You don't - you can't - *sense* anything about where she might be, can you?"

Ron looked at her as if she were barking mad. "I can't *what?*"

"Rowena said you were a Diviner," said Hermione. "I thought maybe

you could divine something."

"Well, I bloody can't," said Ron peevishly. "I can't just perform on demand. I can't perform at all, as a matter of fact. Wait, that didn't come out right." He rubbed the back of his hand across his tired eyes. "I just mean, I've never divined anything, I don't really feature myself starting right now."

Hermione sighed. "Never mind."

Ron perked up briefly. "Unless I was divining some horrible torture for Malfoy. That I could do."

"Oh, Ron." Hermione let out an exasperated sigh. "I for one wish he was here. He could explain what's going on."

"Right, because he did such a good job of explaining when he was here earlier," said Harry, although he said it without rancor.

"I wish he'd just bloody show up too," said Ron, bitterly. "So I could punch in his face."

The black opening in the wall swung open, and Draco came in.

There was a short silence.

"And now I wish I had a million galleons," said Ron, and glanced around hopefully.

Hermione *looked* at him.

"Just checking," he said.

She turned her attention back to Draco, who was walking rapidly across the room towards them. Ginny was not with him. He was carrying his sword, unsheathed, in his hands, and his expression was so extraordinarily bleak that it nearly stopped her heart. Before she could formulate much of a thought, quick as lightning, Ron had gotten to his feet and stepped sideways to put himself between Draco and Harry.

Draco stopped dead, and stared at him. "What are you doing, Weasley?"

Ron crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't need to raise his chin - he already towered over Draco - but he did anyway. "Don't come any closer," he said.

"Move out of the way," said Draco.

Ron shook his head.

"Do you want to move," Draco said, with narrowed eyes, "or do you want to find out what fine Italian footwear tastes like?"

Ron blinked at him. "What?"

"I think he means he'll kick you in the face," said Hermione helpfully.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I'm having a bad day," he said. "My threats are not what they could be. Let's start this over. Move out of the way, Weasley."

"No," said Ron.

"Move out of the way, or I'll slice off your leg and beat you to death with the boot end," said Draco.

"Oooh, that was much better," said Hermione supportively. "Really good imagery."

"I'm still not moving," said Ron.

Hermione looked from Ron to Draco. Harry was behind her, she couldn't see his expression. Draco seemed caught between surprise and bitter amusement.

"Stand aside," he said. "I mean it."

"Put that sword down first."

"Weasley, we haven't got much time. Get out of the way."

Ron didn't move. Draco glanced over at Hermione, who raised her eyes to his. For a moment, their gazes caught and interlocked, and she remembered that these eyes belonged to a boy her own age, and one she loved and had trusted. She had looked into them so many times and seen his own love for her, reflected back, only now it was overlaid with something else, and somehow changed.

It was Harry who spoke next, and for the first time since Draco had come into the room. "Ron. It's all right. Let him by."

Reluctance tempered by confusion, Ron stepped aside, and Draco moved to stand where he had been standing. Hermione saw the bright gleam of blue light on the blade of the sword as he raised it over his head. And Harry - Harry had gotten to his knees, and held his cuffed hands out, so that the chain pulled taut between them. He was looking up at Draco, and his green eyes were steady.

"Do it," he said.

Draco brought the sword down, so fast and so hard that it seemed to whistle as it cut the air. It sliced down, striking the coils of adamantine chain binding Harry's hands together, and shearing them neatly in half. They fell to the ground, not with the clanging sound of metal, but with a hissing sort of noise as of a snake shedding its skin.

Hermione caught her breath and started forward, but a hand gripping her arm prevented her. She knew without looking that it was Ron, but not why he was holding onto her.

Harry got very slowly to his feet, reaching out for the wall to steady himself. She saw Draco reach out as if to help him, then take his hand back quickly. Harry, who was looking down, didn't notice.

Ron let go of her arm. She ran forward to Harry, and put her arms around him, helping him stand up. She felt him grip her shoulder,

as if standing up after so long being chained hurt him. It probably did. He stood still for a moment, as if gauging the steadiness of his legs. Then he took a quick step forward, grabbed a very surprised Draco by the front of his shirt, and shoved him hard against the wall. "All right, Malfoy. Where the hell is Ginny?" he said.

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"Look, a strip search really isn't necessary."

"Oh, but I think it is," said Raven, who was standing with her hands on her hips, looking at Sirius as if she really craved chocolate and he was the last Crème Brûlée truffle in the box. "Now remove your clothes."

"Not without dinner and flowers first."

Raven looked sideways at him, and smiled. "Prisoners must be divested of their wands and other weapons, that's the rules. You could have hidden your wand somewhere on your body. All I have to do is call out, and this room will be filled with dementors willing and eager to assist me. Therefore, you must remove your clothes, or I will bind you and remove them."

"No, come on, I'll just give my wand to you. Look, here it is." He held it out, and Raven took it and pocketed it, a small smile playing about her red lips. There was a certain dark hunger in her eyes that made her banshee heritage suddenly seem very apparent. Sirius felt very sorry that he had ever thought she was attractive. Perhaps this was karma. He sent out a silent apology to Narcissa, who he suddenly missed very much.

"How do I know you don't have two wands?" Raven demanded.

"How do I know you don't have a Lockpick Charm?"

Before this ineluctable logic, Sirius had no response.

"Now remove your clothes," she said.

He began unfastening his robes, wondering how this had all

happened. He was meant to be rescuing his godson, and instead he was doing a striptease for an extremely demanding banshee in a very cold dungeon. He wondered if Draco had known that his incarceration would involve nudity. Better not to think about that. He set to work on his shirt as Raven took hold of his discarded cloak and went through the pockets. She giggled at the Every Flavor Beans in Flower Power Flavors, and gazed quizzically at the Zonko's Magical Reality Pencils and stacks of old letters. "I like you," she said, running a red-nailed finger down his bare chest in a very familiar fashion. "I will let you keep these things."

"If you really liked me you wouldn't make me take my trousers off," he pointed out, backing away.

She smiled at him. "Don't worry. I know it is very cold in this dungeon. I will not pass judgement."

Sirius sighed, and set to work on his trousers.

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"I don't know," said Draco, not taking his eyes away from Harry's. "I thought she'd be *here*. That's why I came. Part of the reason, anyway."

"You don't *know*?" This time it was Ron who spoke. He was pale with rage, his freckles standing out in splotches. "She went to look for you."

"Did she find you?" put in Hermione anxiously.

"Yeah," said Draco. "She found me."

They all stared at him expectantly.

"Would you let go of me?" he said to Harry, almost plaintively. "You're ruining my shirt."

"That is a shame," said Ron, "especially when he should really be ruining your face."

Harry let go of Draco and stepped back. "Talk," he said, tersely.

Draco's eyes went to Hermione. "I was in my room. Ginny found me. I left her there with Fleur when I was summoned to talk to Slytherin. When I came back to the room, she was gone. Fleur said didn't say where she was going, she just went."

"And why should we believe you?" said Ron in a soft and dangerous tone.

"You're right, Weasley. She found me, I killed her, and then I decided to come and tell you all about it because I hadn't yet reached my personal abuse quota for the day and I thought you could help me fill it."

"Well, I think you're lying," said Ron. "That's my opinion."

Draco looked as if he had reached the end of his endurance. "That's your opinion? Well, how would you like me to put my fist in your opinion?"

"Enough!" said Harry sharply. "You two, either have a proper fight, or shut up and get along. But this...this... sarcasm rally is *not* helpful. Ron, he's got no reason to have come here if he is responsible for Ginny being missing. Malfoy, start talking in the next five seconds or I will make you *swallow* that sword."

Draco grinned. It was a fatigued sort of grin, but a real one. "Well, since you ask nicely," he said. The grin faded quickly, and his eyes darkened to slate. "She left this," he said, and held out the folded silvery square of the Cloak. Harry took it without comment. "This is a very bad time for her to be wandering around the castle," Draco added. "Events are on the move. Part of the reason I came here was because I was looking for Ginny. And part of the reason that I need to find her is that, if what she told me is true, she was the way that you all got here. And she's the only way you can leave. And you need to leave *now*." Now he was looking at Harry. "Slytherin wants you dead," he said bluntly. "I stalled him and kept him from killing you; I told him there was some kind of charm on your life. That's



why he wanted your blood. Now that he's examined it, he'll know I was wrong, or lying, and he'll come for you. You have to get out of here before that happens."

Hermione felt as if her blood had turned to ice water. "You got into the cell," she said to Draco. "Can't you let us out?"

He shook his head, avoiding her eyes. "I can let you out, or Ron out. But the wards are charmed to recognize Harry as the prisoner here. If he leaves, the alarms will go off like a rocket. We'll be deluged with dementors within seconds."

"Then Harry stays here," said Ron, firmly. "I'll go look for Ginny."

"I'll come with you," said Hermione quickly.

"Hermione, *no*," said Harry, even more swiftly. He had gone quite pale.

She turned back to him. "Harry, it makes sense. The Lycanthe can feel the presence of other powerful magical objects. It'll be attracted towards the Time-Turner. It'll help us find Ginny, but it won't work for Ron, so I have to take it and go with him. Otherwise he'd just be wandering around lost, and we'd never get you out of here. We'll take the Cloak; it'll be safe."

"There are dozens of powerful magical objects in this castle -" Draco began. And stopped.

"But these two were meant to be used together," said Hermione quietly. "I don't want to go wandering around here any more than Ron does. But it makes sense."

Draco looked down at the floor; Ron looked set and determined. She knew he would go after Ginny even if she didn't come. She turned to look at Harry - and found him staring at her intently.

"I need to talk to you, Hermione," he said, in a fierce, low tone. "Now."

She let him take her hand and draw her across the room, around the side of the wardrobe, where there was a modicum of privacy. Of course, she could still hear Draco's voice, telling Ron to take the Cloak, and he'd give him some instructions on how to find his way around the castle. "Draco Malfoy, deigning to help us," Ron replied, irritably. "Finally I can die happy."

"That could be arranged," replied Draco, ice in his tone.

"Listen, Malfoy. You can take your instructions and you can shove them right up your--"

"Hermione, are you listening?" Harry said.

She turned and raised her face to his, and caught her breath. He was very white, as white as he had been that day when they had stood in front of the Mirror of Erised and he had told her he loved her. She knew how hard that had been for him, sure as he was at the time that what he had to say was too little and too late. She wondered what equivalently terrible thing was weighing on his mind now; or perhaps it was just the danger they were in...

She reached out and took his hands, glancing down at them as she did. Harry's hands, so familiar and so known, even when he was eleven and scrawny and small, he had had these delicate beautiful articulated hands. They were very like Draco's hands, the same tapering fingers, the index a little longer than the others, the same scar on the palm, but they were uniquely Harry's -- hands that passed her quills in Potions class, that carried her books, that reached to catch the Snitch, that held her tightly in the dark.

"I don't want you to go," he said, with a sudden and surprising intensity. "I have a bad, bad feeling about this, Hermione. I want you to stay here."

"I *have* to go. Ginny -"

"I know." He drew her towards him by her wrists. "I know, but--"

"I've hardly ever seen you be frightened," she said, with a wobbly

sort of smile. "This isn't the first time we've ever been in danger, we've looked death in the face before, it's been worse than this -"

Harry's hands tightened on hers. "There are worse things than just dying," he said, his voice low and fierce. "I couldn't stand it - if something happened to you - and I had to wonder, if you were somewhere, waiting for me to - to -"

"*Harry!*" Having no idea what he was talking about, but responding without thought to the pain in his voice, Hermione almost tripped over herself in her hurry to get near him. She flung her arms around him and hugged him hard, and he brushed a hesitant hand over her hair.

"I've always loved your hair," he said.

"Oh surely *not*," said Hermione, before she could help it. "You and Ron used to say it looked like I had a very angry cat on my head!"

Harry choked. "Yes, when we were *twelve*."

"It was still very rude of you," said Hermione. "You should do something to make it up to me."

"I'm not sure we've got enough privacy for that," said Harry, looking solemn.

"You certainly don't!" called Draco irritably from the other side of the wardrobe. "Please - spare us."

Harry closed his eyes. "I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear that."

Hermione reached up and pulled his head down, and kissed him soundly. It always amazed her, even now, that she had to reach *up* to Harry, that he had become so tall and limber and ... grown-up. Not that grown-up was bad. Grown-up was good, especially when it suited someone as well as growing taller and broader in the shoulders seemed to be suiting Harry.

It was a brief kiss, nonetheless. She broke it off, and let Harry lead

her back to the center of the room, where Draco was leaning against the wall near the cell entrance, all elegant scowling and long legs and arms crossed over his chest. She looked at him. "Where's Ron?"

"I'm here," said Ron's voice, from a spot next to Draco. "Why?"

"Erm," said Hermione, staring.

"I threw the Invisibility Cloak on him," said Draco blandly. "I got sick of looking at his face."

There was a sputtering sound, and Ron reappeared, having wriggled out from under the cloak he had, apparently, not noticed he was wearing. He was glaring at Draco again, and quite pink around the ears. "You - sodding - bastard -"

Hermione seized hold of him and dragged him towards the exit.

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Having turned the Time-Turner over, Ginny found herself falling through clouds of violet blankness, but in no recognizable direction. It might have been up, down, or sideways through space. Everything had vanished into the violet nothingness. She knew an endless moment of vertigo and rushing motion, then the dizzy emptiness vanished in a breath and she was standing with her feet on solid ground, surrounded by blackness.

She strained her eyes to see, her heart pounding. She had tried to set the Turner to bring her back to the past at the moment after she had left it, but she wasn't yet adept at setting it. Perhaps she had missed her goal by a few hours, and it was nighttime.

But even in the darkest night she should be able to see her own hands in front of her face.

She scrambled for her wand, and fumbled it out of her pocket. "*Lumos*," she whispered.

Light blossomed from the wand's end, lighting her surroundings.

She was standing in the corridor, exactly where she had expected to arrive. It looked much the same, although the floor was thickly layered in dust, and the torches were missing from the wall brackets.

She hurried forward, suddenly desperate to get outside of the castle, which had a terrible, grim, deserted sort of feeling. Her feet slapping the dusty floor made the only sound: there was no whistle of wind, not even the sound of insects. She reached the end of the corridor, found a heavy, curving stone staircase, and barreled down it as fast as safety permitted. When she reached the foot of the stairs, she found herself in a huge antechamber whose floor, like a chessboard, was patterned with green and white squares of marble. She raced across the floor to the huge double doors, yanked them open, and stepped outside.

And blinked, for a moment unable to grasp quite what it was that she was looking at. Here, there was more light - a faint, gray light almost blocked entirely by an enormous wall surrounding the castle, pushing against its outside walls. Ginny stared in surprise. She had no idea where the wall had come from: circular and huge, it seemed to stretch in all directions around the castle, and up, up, up as far as her eye could see, vanishing into dim nothingness against a smidgen of blue sky the size of a child's marble. As she slowly descended the stairs, she became aware that the wall was not smooth at all, but uneven and irregular, and starred with strange red blossoms...

Roses. It wasn't a wall at all, but an enormous hedge of thorns. Like the brambles that had surrounded Sleeping Beauty's castle she thought, almost giggling with the intensity of the nervousness she felt. The Prince had managed to cut his way through the brambles - she thought very briefly of Draco, and his sword - but there was no Prince here, she was on her own.

Driven by an impulse she couldn't quite identify, she reached out and gently touched the Time-Turner to the edge of a leaf.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a loud sussuration, like the sound of many rushing waters, the branches began to curl away from her, bending themselves backward, opening a path to let

her through. Through the gap in the hedge she glimpsed brilliant green grass, starred with white flowers. She stepped through quickly, and the hedge sealed itself up behind her as if there had never been a gap.

She glanced around wonderingly. She stood in a clearing, and in the distance she could see the dark line of trees where the forest began. The forest that had grown up to the very edge of the castle in her own time. But now it was far back, and in front of it stretched a long and grassy clearing, in the midst of which were a number of multicolored tents. She was strongly reminded of the war camp she had visited with Ron and Hermione.

She set forth nearly at a run, suddenly filled with a desperation to see people - almost any people, she felt, would have done. The castle had been so silent, so eerie. She reached the center of the camp, and glanced around. There were tents in many colors: blue, bright green, orange, and to her left a tall scarlet-walled tent bearing on its closed flap the emblem of a golden lion.

*Gryffindor.*

She ran towards the tent, and paused at the entrance. There was nowhere to knock, that she could tell. Gingerly, she reached forward and drew back a corner of the tent flap, and peered into the darkness inside.

Like most wizarding tents, the inside bore no resemblance to the outside. On the inside, the walls were made of dark, panelled wood, there was a fireplace (empty--since the day was warm and bright) a number of small windows, without panes, and a large round mahogany table in the center of the room, which was embossed with patterns of stars and moons in gold. Leaning against one table leg, quite casually, was a long silver sword in a scabbard decorated with brilliant enameled leaves, flowers and animals.

A movement in the corner of the room caught her eyes. She turned, and stared.

And saw someone staring back. Sitting in the corner of the tent, on a

wooden footstool, was a tall man with a shock of unruly black hair, and brilliant dark eyes. He looked as if he were about twenty, and more interestingly, was shirtless, wearing a pair of leather breeches, and apparently in the middle of doing up the laces on his boots.

He stared at Ginny.

Ginny stared at him.

He found his voice first. Letting his boot drop to the ground, he stood up, and in a voice several octaves deeper than it had been the last time she had heard it, said, "Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my tent?"

Caught between shock and an insane desire to giggle, Ginny took her hand away from her mouth. "*Ben?*" she said.

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The dungeon was a dungeon. It bore a startling resemblance to other dungeons Sirius had been in. The Malfoy dungeon, for instance. Thick stone walls dripping with unpleasant moisture. Thick gray cell-bars wound around with magical wards. The smell of moss, old sweat, and fear. Dungeons were all the same.

At least he had his clothes back. Raven had allowed him to have them back, along with all his possessions save his wand. He wondered how long it would be possible to survive on Every Flavor Beans. He wondered if he was going to find out.

The silence of the dungeon seemed to stretch on and on. To distract himself, Sirius reached into his pockets and began to spread their contents on the ground in front of him. V The Zonko's pencils. The letters from his old girlfriends. He picked one up and flipped it open randomly. *Darling Sirius, I'm sitting here in History of Magic-- thinking about whether I should catch up on that sleep I missed last night while we were--um...watching the stars... Anyway, is it just me or is Professor Binns getting kind of dusty?*

Sirius grinned and shoved the letter back into his pocket. Then

there were other letters, addressed to James, in Lily's delicate handwriting, the sight of which made his throat close up and his chest tighten. James Potter, 30 Galloping Drive, Godric's Hollow, Wales. The sight of the address written there in Lily's hand brought up the memory of the house as even the sight of its blasted ruins had not, the memory of the house as he had last seen it, crawling through its rubble under a sky striped green and black.

He tightened his fist on the parchment, crumpling it in his hand. *James*. They came now, the memories, thick and fast: the dark thoughts of ghosts. *James*. He hadn't been able to find Lily at all, that night. She has been buried, gone, rubble had covered her. But *James*. He had not been crushed, or wounded in any visible way, but it was a lie, Sirius thought

*<feeling the grit under his hands as he crawled over broken wood and stone, tasting bitter copper in his mouth where he had bitten his lip>*

that the dead resemble their living selves, only sleeping. He had known right away that James was dead. He lay where he had fallen, on his back, one hand flung out and clutching the wand that, at the end, had been no use to him, the other hand on his chest. His glasses were gone, had fallen off, smashed somewhere, and Sirius wanted to find them and give them back to him because of course James couldn't see properly at all without his glasses, he never could.

There in the broken house, choking on poisonous dust, Sirius put his face down on James' shoulder and cried, a crying too awful and too profound to produce any tears. He whispered under his breath as he cried, asked James to come back, to please come back. If James had lived, he would, however far away he might have been, have returned to Sirius had his friend so desperately called for him. But the dead are selfish and reluctant travelers. They do not come back, no matter how much they are needed, no matter how greatly they are missed. No matter if their loss can be survived by those who are left behind.

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"It's not working," said Hermione, in disbelief, holding the Lycanthe in her hand and staring at it.

"What do you mean it isn't working?" Ron demanded.

They were huddled together, the cloak wrapped around them, under a stairwell just outside the cell. Clutching the Lycanthe so tightly that it dug into her palm, Hermione stared at it. "It's not picking up anything," she said, her voice tinged with panic.

"Now what?" She could feel the tension in Ron's shoulder where it pressed into hers. "What do we do?"

She straightened up, letting the Lycanthe fall to the end of the chain around her neck. "We go - this way," she announced, randomly dragging Ron out of the stairwell and down a corridor. He didn't protest as he followed her, which was, she thought, unlike him. He was probably out of ideas as well.

The hallway ended in a staircase, whose steps were so worn that many of them seemed almost no more than irregularities in the stone. Hermione wondered whose feet had originally worn them as she and Ron began racing down them. A clear memory formed in her head of racing down these steps before, hand in hand with someone else. Someone not Ron. Someone with silver hair.

She stopped, and put out a hand to steady herself. She heard Ron's voice in her ear. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Nothing - I'm fine."

But she wasn't. They turned a corner and found themselves in a broad, semicircular hallway whose walls were lined with innumerable doors. The ceiling above vanished into greenish mist. The walls were bare, but Hermione knew, as if by memory, that once they had been hung with tapestries depicting a unicorn hunt. And the ceiling had been enameled with stars. There had been couches along the walls, long couches covered in pillows of scarlet and emerald and blue, and she remembered having lain down on those

couches, and not alone, either...

Hermione felt herself turn scarlet and was very glad that she was invisible. *Oh my*. She looked down, realized she was clutching the Lycanthe, and released it quickly. The feeling of memory pressing in on her faded slightly. She was fairly sure that she was still bright red, though. *How does one do that on a couch without falling off?*

"Hermione." It was Ron, speaking into her ear again, or near her ear. He couldn't see her, so he was pretty much speaking into her neck. "Do you hear that?"

She raised her head, a little dizzy. "What?"

"Listen. Someone's crying."

Hermione swiveled her head, listening. And heard it. The faint sound of sobbing, coming from behind one of the closed doors. "That doesn't sound like Ginny," she said, positively, but Ron had already grabbed her hand and was dragging her towards the door. She felt him glance around, then push the door open, and they went through.

This room was low-ceilinged and bare, and evoked no memories in Hermione. At least, it looked bare at first glance, and was very dark. But then, as she stared, she saw a patch of greater darkness, a huddled shape like a puddle of shadow, in one corner, from which the crying sound originated. As she and Ron moved uncertainly towards the shape, she realized - she *knew* - that it was not, of course, Ginny. The crying was the weak, plaintive crying of a child, but as they drew closer it became clear that this was in fact, an adult. An adult man, short, round, and plump, whose balding head glimmered in the faint light and whose sniveling cries were very, very familiar...

"*Wormtail*," hissed Ron, in astonishment.

Wormtail's body jerked to attention with a rattling sound, and Hermione saw that there was a cuff around his leg, chaining him to the wall. It wasn't an adamantine cuff, only rusty metal, but then he

wasn't a Magid. "Who's there?" he barked shrilly.

Hermione caught at Ron's arm, but it was too late. He had stepped out from under the Invisibility Cloak and was standing with his wand pointed at Wormtail, his blue eyes blazing with rage. "You," he hissed. "*Murderer.*"

"I never murdered anyone!" squeaked Wormtail, thrashing about in his chains as if he could get farther away from Ron somehow. His eyes were huge and fearful. "What are you *doing* here?"

Hermione pulled the cloak off herself and rushed over to Ron, catching at his arm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to kill him," said Ron. "Somebody ought to have, a long time ago."

"Ron! You don't know how to do the Killing Curse -"

"I can try it till I get it right," he said, his wand still aimed at Wormtail's heart.

"Go ahead," said Wormtail, in a sneering, squeaking voice. "There are wards up all over this room. One spell, and the guards will be all over you."

Ron looked furious. "You're lying."

"Ron!" Hermione lunged at him, grabbing his wand arm and hanging on. "Don't!"

"I'm not going to," he said quietly, his eyes still fixed on Wormtail. "But I want to know what he knows. And if I can't do a spell, I'll break every bone in his miserable body."

"Do I look like I know anything?" spat Wormtail. "Do I look like I am still my Master's most trusted confidante? He said I betrayed him - I nearly allowed his Heir to die. He kept me alive but he took - *this.*" And with a snivelling gasp, he ratcheted back his right sleeve, and held out his arm.

Hermione swallowed her nausea. His hand was gone; his pale, pudgy arm ended in a blackened stump of scar tissue. She had no sympathy for him - if there was any one person in the world she hated without reservation, it was Wormtail - but the sight was still sickening.

"Do you know what *his* plans are?" she demanded, her eyes fastened on Wormtail's pudgy, fearful face. He was sweating profusely, as he usually did when he was afraid, the sweat seeming to come from a deeper place than his pores, as if he actually sweated fear. "What does he want with Harry?"

Wormtail's eyes widened. "He's got Harry?"

Ron almost seemed to be vibrating with rage. "Don't pretend like you don't know," he snarled. "It's your fault - all of this is your fault."

In response, Wormtail, his face striped with sweat and dirt, glared back at Ron, and spit on the floor at his feet. "Go on and torture me if you want," he said, his voice still squeaky. "I can't get away. I can't stop you. *Do it.*"

Ron didn't move, just stood where he was, waves of anger pulsing from his body. Hermione put her hand on his arm. "Ron, come on," she whispered. "He's not worth it. We've got to go."

. Hermione put her hand on his arm. "Ron, come on," she whispered. "He's not worth it. We've got to go."

Ron allowed her to lead him away, although he glared back over his shoulder at Wormtail as they went. Her heart ached for him - she knew he had felt somehow as if Wormtail was his responsibility, as if he should have known about Scabbers and done something. And it just wasn't in Ron's nature to torture a man who was chained up and couldn't get away, no matter how foul or evil that man might be. He was probably blaming himself for that, too. She was about to say something to him, something reassuring, when Wormtail spoke from behind them.

"It's the Orb you want," he said.

Hermione spun around, Ron beside her. "What?"

"The Orb." Wormtail's round chin was sunk into his fat neck, his eyes glittering with what could have been malice, or could have been fear. "If you can get to that and open it before he manages to fill his bargain with the demons - you might have a chance. That's the last thing he wants."

Ron's hand was tight on Hermione's wrist. She remembered Rowena's quiet voice, telling her about the Orb, its powers. "Where is the Orb?" she said, her voice unsteady. "Where is he keeping it?"

"When you were first here, do you remember that he took you to a room with a tapestry in it? It's in there. Find it, open it - if you can figure out how - you might have a chance."

"And how do we know you're not lying?" she demanded.

Wormtail's eyes flashed briefly. "You don't."

"Bastard," Ron hissed under his breath, and Hermione began to lead him towards the door again, her back prickling with revulsion and fear. When the door had closed between them and Wormtail again, she unfurled the cloak, and threw it to Ron. Then she reached around her throat, and took off the Lycanthe. She placed it in the palm of her hand. "*Ultima thule*," she said, and the Lycanthe swung around to point north.

"What are you doing?" Ron demanded.

"The room he was talking about was in the west part of the castle. I remember seeing the sunset out the window while I was looking at the tapestry."

"Hermione," protested Ron, shaking his head so that his red hair fell into his eyes. "You don't *believe* him, do you? He's probably leading us into a trap. If he wants us to go west, I say we go east."

West is probably some room full of guards or something."

"We´re got the cloak," said Hermione, a little weakly. "It wouldn´t hurt to check."

Ron gave her a steady, searching look. Reluctantly, she nodded, and replaced the Lycanthe around her neck. "Fine. We can go east. Maybe I´ll start picking up some sign of Ginny in that direction."

They wrapped the cloak around themselves, and headed towards the easternmost corridor. It twisted sharply to the right, then to the left, then to the right again, and just as they turned the last blind corner, they ran directly and without any preamble into the arms of a large group of gray-robed guards.

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The dark opening in the wall closed up behind Hermione and Ron, and Harry felt a wave of fear wash over him. It had taken every bit of self-control he had not to try to stop them, and because his concern was magnified by the sight of them going, the sight of Hermione looking back over her shoulder briefly, her eyes worried and dark and fixed on his, almost undid him.

He turned away, fell back against the wall, leaning hard against it, and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the first thing he saw was Draco, looking back at him, his gray eyes very wide and nearly transparent in the glare of the blue light.

Draco, chameleon-like, usually had the ability to look at home in almost any setting. Now, however, he looked extraordinarily uncomfortable, as if he very much wished to be somewhere else and in fact was imagining that he was somewhere else. He almost didn´t seem to see Harry at all, or at least his eyes didn´t focus on him properly until Harry moved, his hand going to his throat, taking the Epicyclical Charm by its chain, and drawing it over his head. He held it up, dangling it in front of Draco´s eyes, and said,

"What the *hell* was this about, Malfoy?"

Now Draco reacted. He smiled, his eyes on the Charm. "Happy Birthday?" he suggested gently.

Harry blinked, surprised. He had forgotten that it was his birthday in two weeks. The fact that Draco had actually remembered this was also disturbing, but not in any way that he wanted to tackle at the moment.

"You couldn't have maybe gotten me a watch?" he said irritably instead. "Or you, know, maybe *not* cut a big hole in my arm? In honor of the occasion."

"It's not that big a hole in your arm," Draco pointed out.

"What was that? Was that an apology? Oh, wait, no, that was just you being obnoxious some more."

"Last time I apologized to you, you told me to sod off."

Harry blinked. He had no recollection of Draco having apologized to him, at any point. His memory of pretty much everything after Draco had told him about his parents, up to the point where Fleur and Slytherin had come in on them, was a blur of shrieking noise, splattering blood, and a white blank buzzing in his head. "You apologized?"

"Profusely." The side of Draco's mouth twitched. Harry looked at him suspiciously.

"So do it again."

"What? Apologize?"

"Yeah."

"I apologized to you once. You threw in back in my face. The day I apologize to you again, Satan will be ice-skating to work."

"Why? Didn't your father teach you good manners?"

Draco flinched imperceptibly, even though his expression didn't alter. "Would it mean anything to you even if I did? If I apologized again?"

"Do you think it's that easy?" Harry felt his anger rise again. "One word, and it all goes away?" His hands were clenched. "Well, just to let you know it's *not*."

"I know." Draco took a deep breath. "What do you want to do then? Hit me?"

"No I don't." Harry paused. "That doesn't hurt enough."

"You don't want to?" Draco smiled humorlessly. "I doubt that. If I were you, I'd want to hit me. Sometimes *I* want to hit me."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"All right, then," said Harry, and drew back his fist and punched him hard in the stomach.

-Several minutes later-

"Sorry, Malfoy."

"Urgh."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't know you were wounded. You should have said something."

"Urgh," said Draco again, and sat up, gingerly. The moment Harry's first had made contact with him, he had turned white, doubled over and dropped like a rock, with his hands wrapped around his stomach. When he took them away, there was blood on his fingers. Harry had been completely astounded. He hadn't hit the other boy *that* hard, had he? He had fallen to his knees next to Draco, who had



grabbed him by the front of his robe and told him in very profane terms *exactly* how much it hurt getting punched in the stomach when one already had a sword wound there, and how, if Draco could actually stand up, he would make Harry very sorry indeed. Visions of all the punching fights they'd already been in danced in Harry's head. He'd never actually managed to knock Draco down with one punch before. He didn't feel too good about it at the moment, though.

"So much for hitting me not hurting enough," said Draco, when he got his breath back, and stopped swearing. "In retrospect, *not* an accurate theory."

"Why haven't you fixed it?" Harry demanded, absently looping the Epicyclical Charm back around his neck because it was too much trouble holding it in his hand. "Why walk around with a big cut if you don't need to?"

"Keeps me honest." Draco sat up, touched his fingers carefully to his side, flinched, and shook his head. "My father used to say..."

He broke off, leaning back against the wall as if he were very tired.

"What?" said Harry, curious.

"Nothing." Draco touched his side again, and winced.

"Something about pain?"

He shut his eyes. *Let it go, Potter.*

Harry jumped. "What are you doing, Malfoy?"

*Don't talk out loud. Not that it probably matters, but. I have some things I need to tell you.*

Harry's eyes darted around the room. *But... can't he hear us?*

*Not according to Fleur.*

*I think I missed the part where I believe anything she says. As a matter of fact, I may have missed the part where I believe anything you say.*

Draco opened his eyes and looked at Harry tensely. *Would I have given you the Charm, the means to kill me, if I wasn't to be trusted?*

*You know I wouldn't use it.*

*Sure you would.*

Harry wasn't sure whether or not to be appalled. *Even if I wanted you dead -- that would be a cowardly way of killing anyone.*

Draco's eyes were fixed on Harry. *You'd do it if you had to. What if I was threatening Hermione? You wouldn't believe what you're capable of, Potter, if you're pushed. You're not all that different from me. Not really.*

*Let me get this straight.* Harry felt his head beginning to hurt. *You gave me the Charm to show I could trust you. Did you have some kind of a plan?*

*I did have a plan. But there was a tiny flaw in that plan.*

*Which was?*

*It was bollocks.*

Harry rolled his eyes. *Have you got a better plan, now?*

*No. I've got no plan. I'm just winging it. But there's something you need to know.*

*Is this something that's going to really, really upset me?*

Draco paused for a moment. Yes.

*Is it absolutely necessary that I know this?*

Another pause. Yes.

*Fine. What is it?*

*Sirius is here, in the castle.*

Harry's heart leaped up and banged painfully against his ribcage.  
*What? Where?*

*In the dungeon.*

*Slytherin threw him in the dungeon?*

No. Draco tilted up his head, and looked Harry directly in the eyes. I  
*threw him in the dungeon.*

A long moment of silence. Harry silently counted to ten, which didn't help at all. When he spoke again, he could hear the ice in his own voice. "It just never stops with you, does it?"

Draco's eyes narrowed. He began to get to his feet, bracing his hands against the wall. Harry got up, standing as Draco was standing, not wanting the other boy towering over him.

"And you told me this why?" said Harry. "Do you *want* me to hate you?"

"I told you because it's the truth and you should know it," said Draco, tonelessly.

"Now there's a new attitude coming from you," snarled Harry. "I thought your idea of the right way to handle these things was to wait until you needed a wall broken down, and then hey, out with the truth! Let's see how hacked off Harry can get! Let's tell him all about his dead parents! Let's throw his godfather in jail for a lark!"

Draco's eyes had narrowed to slits. "Congratulations," he said. "You have truly perfected the fine art of whining. Did you ever think that maybe this had *nothing* to do with you?"

"This is Sirius we´re talking about! Throwing him in prison, it´s not like just locking up anyone! He spent twelve years in jail, did you ever--"

"I was trying to save his life!" Draco yelled at the top of his lungs, so angry now that even his hair seemed to be crackling with rage. "He would have died if I hadn´t thrown him in prison! And so would you bloody have, if I hadn´t done what I did for you!"

"Yeah, because you would have killed me!" shouted Harry. "There´s circular logic for you! You saved me from you! Congratulations! Pin a medal on this guy, he´s a hero. What did you save Sirius from?" He was shouting so loudly now, his words were bouncing off the walls of the cell, mingling with the echo of Draco´s voice. "Were you about to run him over and you decided nah, let´s throw him in prison instead?"

"He came here in disguise, you stupid twonk," Draco snarled, his eyes flashing copper with rage, like a cat´s. "He disguised himself as a vampire, but all dark creatures coming into the castle have to be Tested, and the Test is fatal to humans. So I had him put where they wouldn´t be able to get at him, not now, anyway. And he´s safe there. And I am *done explaining myself to you, Potter!* I am sick and tired of you not believing me! If you think I´m so bloody untrustworthy than why don´t you take out that Charm and stomp it the hell into dust! I won´t stop you -- in fact, I´ll encourage it, because I´d rather die than spend one more second listening to you whinging, you mealy-mouthed, rat-faced, four-eyed little *bastard!*"

Draco brought himself up short, gasping for breath as if he had been running. His eyes were nearly black with anger, his fists clenched at his sides.

Harry looked at him in surprise. Usually Draco expressed his ire via stony seething. Harry had never seen him so visibly angry before. It was a bit of a shock and, somehow, a blow to his own rage. Harry felt his own anger drain out of him as if someone had pulled the plug on a basin filled with boiling, poisonous water. He raised his head and looked at Draco squarely.

"Could you repeat that?" he said.

Draco just blinked at him, rage blocking out comprehension. Finally, he ground out, nearly in a whisper, "What?"

"That was a pretty impressive speech," said Harry. "I'd kind of like to hear it again."

Draco's hands very slowly unclenched at his sides. His voice was unsteady. "Which...part?"

"I think I was particularly partial to the bit where I have a rat face," said Harry, quite sincerely.

Draco shook his head, slowly. "You're barking mad, Potter."

*I'm also sorry.*

*What?* Draco's eyes widened. The faint blue light struck copper sparks from his eyes. *What for?*

*For a lot of things, but mostly because I never told you I was sorry your father died.*

Shock moved across Draco's face, followed by suspicion. *I figured that was because you weren't sorry. You know, no big loss to the gene pool and all that. He wasn't the nicest guy. And he was planning on killing you. You could be forgiven for not feeling...*

*I'm the last person to want anyone to lose their parents,* Harry replied.

For a moment, that statement simply hung there, so heavily that Harry could almost imagine his words painted on the air between them. Draco looked as if he were grasping after words, which Harry wouldn't have previously imagined was possible. Finally, he straightened his shoulders and looked at Harry squarely.

*About your parents, Potter...about what I said...*

*Forget about it.*

Forget about it?

Now it was Harry's turn to take a deep breath. *I guess you can't, can you? Because I know I never will. I won't forgive you for that.*

Draco looked, very briefly, blank with shock. Whatever he had been expecting Harry to say, it hadn't been that. The shock went away, and was replaced by something worse. The unhappiness in his expression was startling. Harry felt it cut through him as if it was his own. *Well.* Even Draco's inner voice sounded terse and wretched. *I guess that's your right.*

He glanced away. Harry watched him, and felt suddenly - contrite. More than contrite. As if he had hurt Ron badly, or Hermione, or someone else close enough to him that their pain had become, in some sense, his own responsibility.

*Malfoy. Wait.*

Draco's eyes widened fractionally and he paused. *What?*

*I shouldn't have said that. I can forgive you. I can make myself.*

Draco just looked at him.

*Hermione. I was talking to her about this today.*

*And what? She hates me now, too?*

*No. She doesn't. She doesn't see you the way you see yourself, Malfoy, or even the way I see you. She doesn't see me that way, either. She sees what we could be, what we could do, and that's what's real to her. In her eyes, we're better than we are, braver than we are, more honest than we are. She believes in you. And I'm not going to deny that she might be right. She usually is. So I will - I mean, I do. Forgive you.*

A very small smile had come to hover around the corners of Draco's

mouth. Somewhere in his expression, Harry found a memory of a little boy in Madam Malkin's dress shop, pale and small and somewhat lost in his black robes, who looked at him with superior eyes and drawled like no eleven-year-old Harry had ever met before. The first Hogwarts student Harry had ever seen. And that had been the first and almost the last time Draco had ever smiled at him.

*That, and even Draco's inner voice, Harry thought, had a little bit of a drawl to it, was a hell of a speech, Potter.*

*Yeah.* A wry smile touched the edge of Harry's mouth. *I've been practicing.* He looked down briefly, saw the Epicyclical Charm glittering around his throat, and on impulse, stuck out his hand, feeling slightly silly as he did so. *So we're all right, then.*

*I dunno.* Draco looked at his hand with his eyebrows raised. *You still think I stabbed you in the back?*

*Maybe,* replied Harry. *But I've decided that, given everything we've been through, you get that one for free. Next time, though. Next time I'll take your head off.*

Draco stood there for another long moment, looking at Harry's outstretched hand, his gray eyes unreadable. Harry was reminded again of Draco at eleven, holding out his hand in the train compartment for Harry to take. And Harry hadn't taken it. Now he held out his own hand, and waited for Draco to take it, thinking it would be only poetic justice if he refused it.

Finally a smile broke out over Draco's face, one of his rare, infrequent *real* smiles that were like music or sunrise and reminded Harry why it probably was that Hermione liked him so much.

Draco reached out, and took Harry's hand: his left hand, and Harry's right. The scars on their palms brushed each other, and Harry felt a bolt of cold go through his hand.

*I really am sorry about your father. It's not fair.*

Draco's eyes unfocused slightly, almost as if he was looking at

something beyond Harry. *That's true*, he said, *but think how much worse it would be if life was fair, and all the awful things that happened to us happened because we actually deserve them. I for one take great comfort in the completely impersonal hostility of the universe.*

*Wow. That's a really depressing worldview, Malfoy.*

*Thanks. So you trust me?*

*I trust you.*

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"Do you think we're going to die?" said Ron, sounding curious.

Hermione lifted her face out of her hands and looked at him dully. Like her, he was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall. This was probably because the cell they were locked in had no chairs, not even a bench to sit on. It was a windowless stone room without even straw thrown on the floor. The walls were dank and freezing to the touch. She had begun to wish she had her jeans back again, since the hem and sleeves of her blue robe had been dragged in the dust and dampness, and a guard had torn a ragged hole in her sleeve when he had thrown her in the cell. Ron had come off a bit worse: one of the guards had hit him when he resisted having the Invisibility Cloak taken away from him, and he had a dramatic and rapidly purpling bruise on one cheek.

"I don't know," she said softly, and glanced down. One stroke of luck was that none of the guards had tried to take the Lycanthe away from her, probably assuming it to be jewelry of some sort. However, no spells she tried inside the cell seemed to be working at all. It must, she decided, be quite thoroughly warded. "I'd imagine they're going to report finding us to Slytherin, and he'll probably...come for us."

Ron was looking away now. "We lost Harry's cloak," he said, after a moment.



"I know."

"It belonged to his father."

"I *know* that. Don't dwell, Ron."

"He's going to -"

"Be panicking over where we are, not worrying about his stupid cloak. Oh, *God*," said Hermione, with a sort of despair. She couldn't bear thinking about how worried Harry would be. Couldn't get the memory of that look on his face when she and Ron had left him in the cell out of her mind - white with worry, trying to smile, not because he wanted to, but for her. She turned away from Ron, and, miserably, began poking at a loose brick in the wall with the point of the Lycanthe.

Ron was silent for a moment. Then she felt, rather than heard, him get to his feet and come to sit beside her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a bit of red hair, the scuffed knees of his jeans, his tanned, freckled hand resting on his knee. "You're not trying to tunnel our way to freedom, are you?" he said, after a moment.

"No. I'm not."

"Good. Because I think you're just tunneling into an adjacent cell anyway."

Hermione stopped poking at the wall, and turned around, resting her back against the stones. At the look on Ron's face, she relented slightly. "We've been in situations where we thought we were going to die before, haven't we?" she said gently. "And we're all right."

"Yeah." Ron's voice was distant. "But we were usually with Harry." He was quiet for a moment, staring into space. "Hermione?"

"Uh-huh?"

"If we're going to die anyway..."

"Don't be defeatist," she admonished, poking the Lycanthe at the wall again.

"Well, you admit it looks bad for us."

"I don't admit anything."

"Yeah, you never do."

"I am not going to squabble with you right now."

"Look, I'm just saying, if we're going to die anyway..."

*"Don't say that!"*

"I always thought I'd have sex before I died," he added thoughtfully.

Hermione dropped the Lycanthe. "Ron! Too much information!" She reached down to pick it up, and accidentally jammed one of the points of the sideways X into her thumb. "Ouch!"

"You all right?"

"I'm fine." She put the cut side of her thumb in her mouth and sucked on it mournfully for a moment.

"Good."

"No thanks to you," she added, slightly childishly.

Ron ignored this. "Be that as it may, as we are, obviously, going to die, then there's something I think I should tell you."

She looked at his suddenly serious expression in surprised bewilderment. "*What* are you going on about?" Something occurred to her then, and she scooted closer to him, staring anxiously into his face. "Ron. Are you all right? Is everything - you're not sick, or dying, or--"

He cut her off with a short, mirthless laugh. "No. It isn't that." He reached out then and took hold of her hands, closing his fingers a little awkwardly around them. She looked at him in utter bewilderment, shocked by how pale and determined he seemed, by the clouded, troubled look in his blue eyes. "I hope this doesn't make you hate me," he began, his voice very low and urgent, "because I don't know what I'd do if you hated me, but I have to tell you that-

"Psst!"

Hermione's head whipped around. "Did you hear that?"

Ron looked mutinous. "I didn't hear anything."

The noise came again. "Psst! *Hermione!* Ron!"

Hermione yanked her hand out of Ron's and spun around, listening for the source of the noise. "Who's there?" she whispered, her eyes huge.

Ron was goggling as well now. "That sounded like *Sirius*," he whispered.

"It *is* me," came the voice again, and this time Hermione was able to gauge the location the voice was emanating from - the wall. "I think you managed to loosen one of the bricks by scraping at it, so I pulled it out of the wall. Can you see me?"

Ron at her side, Hermione stared at the wall until she found the dark opening Sirius had made. Then she scrambled towards it, bending down to stare, and found Sirius' bright dark eyes looking back from the other side.

"Sirius!" she gasped, both wildly relieved and horrified to see him at the same time. "What are you doing down here?"

"Actually," he said, and there was a note of almost-amusement in his voice, "I was sketching. As to how I got down here, it's a bit of a long story and I'm not sure you would believe me if I told you. The

real question is, are you all right? Are you hurt at all?"

"I´m fine," she said, a huge lump forming in her throat. "I´m fine, not hurt at all--"

"And Ron?"

Hermione leaned back as Ron took her place at the wall. He looked just as relieved and shocked as she felt. "Sirius!" he exclaimed. "I´m fine, too, but what about you? How long have you been down here?"

"Few hours," said Sirius briefly, an I-don´t-want-to-talk-about-it note in his voice. "I was listening to you two talk for a while before I realized who you were. And *none* of us are going to die. All right?"

"All right," said Ron, managing half a grin.

"And don´t worry about Harry´s cloak. We´ll get it back."

Ron nodded. "Okay."

"Oh, and Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Don´t worry about the not having had sex business," said Sirius magnanimously. "You´re only seventeen. Good things come to those who wait."



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They sat facing each other across the small round table: Ginny on one side, Benjamin Gryffindor on the other. He had gotten dressed and was staring at her, as he had been since she had arrived, as if he had seen a ghost. The Gryffindor sword was still leaning against the table; every time she saw it, she thought of Harry, and of the rest of them, in the future where she had left them. It was so quiet here and so peaceful, with all the pretty multicolored tents among the green grass and the view of the castle over the hedge of brambles, looking as pretty and harmless as a picture from a history book.

"So let me get this straight," said Ben, still looking at her, wide-eyed. It was still a bit odd to see such dark eyes in a face that looked like Harry's. "You want to borrow an *army*?"

Ginny sighed, and templed her fingers together under her chin. "Look," she began, trying to find the words to explain. "We haven't got the resources to face Slytherin in the future. We haven't got armies like you do, and the Ministry doesn't even believe that he's returned, mostly because they don't want to."

Ben looked at her quizzically. "The Ministry? Is that like the Wizards' Council?"

"Probably. Wait, let me see if I can remember my history. The Council was abolished in 1612 because--"

"Don't. Don't tell me too much about the future. I don't want to know." He sighed, and shook his head. "I have to say I really never thought I'd see you again. I do actually remember you, even though I was only twelve."

"Well, I remember you," smiled Ginny, "but that's because for me, it was yesterday."

Ben nodded. "Rowena said she'd given you the information you'd need to defeat - him - in your own time."

Ginny shook her head. "It wasn't enough. I don't know if she understood that in the future, the magical community just wouldn't be prepared to deal with a threat like this. He's got all the Dark creatures on his side - the werewolves and the trolls and the dementors - there are just so *many* of them."

He raised his eyebrows. "How do you know so much about Slytherin's weaponry and the forces he commands?"

"From my friends. It's complicated...but..." Ginny broke off. "Ben, where are the Heirs?" she asked abruptly.

Ben looked taken aback. "Who?"

"The other Heirs. Besides you."

"Well." Ben ticked them off on his fingers. "Rowena's daughter is eleven; she just started at Hogwarts. The rest of Helga's brood are all over in Ireland right now. And I'm here, keeping an eye on things. Just a few months out of the year, but somebody has to..."

"And the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Gareth?" Ben's eyes flicked away from hers. "He's not around much."

"Do you know him? Are you enemies?" Ginny demanded, suddenly fascinated, seeing as she did the possibility for a weird echo of Harry and Draco's complicated and often bewildering relationship.

"Why? Is this something to do with the Heir of Slytherin in your own time?" Ben neatly turned the tables on her, leaning his chin on his hand. "What's he like?"

"Draco? He's...complicated," said Ginny. "He isn't an simple person to know. He's not very easy to be friends with, although he's loyal, and he never lies, even though he does conceal things. Oh dear. It's hard to explain. And he treats girls appallingly," she added as an afterthought, pulling a face.

Ben raised his dark eyebrows. "Has he treated you appallingly?"

"Not yet," said Ginny. "But I'm working on it."

Ben coughed, which sounded a lot like a laugh that he was covering up. At that moment, the tent flap opened and a house-elf came in with fruit and bread and cheeses on a tray. Suddenly feeling famished, Ginny tore into the food. When she looked up again, Ben was still gazing at her, a faint line of worry between his eyebrows. "I don't understand this business about wanting an army," he said. "I mean, yes, the soldiers who fought in the War are still around, and we could form an army now if needed, but what good does that do you? We're here, in our own time."

"I thought I could bring them through," said Ginny, fixing her eyes on Ben. "This Key of Helga's, this Time-Turner, is very powerful. If I

could borrow your army, I´m pretty sure I could bring them all through to my own time. I can´t explain how I know I could do it, but I could."

But Ben was shaking his head, and Ginny saw, with a sinking feeling, that he looked not intrigued by her suggestion, but appalled.

"Ginny, no--"

"I know I arrived here about eight years after I meant to, but I think I know what I did wrong, I can fix it, make it work this time--"

"It´s not that!" Ben sprang up, and put his hands on the table, leaning forward. "It´s the nature of time I´m concerned about," he said, not looking at her. "Ginny, if you bring people into the future, you´re taking them out of their own time. What if they die there? And what if, because they die there, people who were supposed to be born were never born? Helga used to talk about time paradoxes. That´s just what you´d be creating. The result might be an alternate future, one where you, or your friends, were never born at all."

Ben shook his head, his dark eyes full of regret and sorrow. "I´m so sorry," he said. "I can´t help you."

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They sat shoulder to shoulder on the floor of the adamantine cell, as Harry had sat earlier with Hermione and Ron. And to Harry´s surprise, it was equally comforting, in an odd sort of way, to have Draco there. He never would have thought that proximity to Draco Malfoy would be a source of consolation. How things did change.

"Knut for your thoughts, Potter," said Draco, who had his knees pulled up to his chin, his arms wrapped around them.

"I was wondering if you still had those sudden urges to kill me," said Harry. "Not, you know, that I´d judge you if you did." He grinned. "But I might send you out to get me an asbestos-coated flak jacket, just to be safe."



A line of confusion appeared between Draco's eyes. "A *what?*"

"Nothing. Bad joke. But I was serious about the killing me thing."

Draco shook his head. "No."

"No? It just went away?"

"Uh-huh." Draco shrugged, seeming disinclined to elaborate. "Since we fought the manticore. I don't know why. It's just another in a long list of things that doesn't make any sense."

There was a introspective pause during which both boys seemed lost in thought. Finally, Harry sighed. "You know, I'm getting a little tired of all this 'go here, stand there, wait for the evil that will inevitably come and kill you.' Not that I've died yet, but it's just a matter of time. I want to *do* something."

"Come on, Potter. Where's your sense of mystery and adventure? I mean, I already died. It wasn't so bad."

Harry idly watched Draco as he flipped over the sword in his hand, the light reflecting off its grooved surface. "Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"Not at all. Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good. Because it really depresses me when you do that."

"In that case, let me point out that Slytherin probably has something really horrible planned for you. I mean, he said he'd use any means necessary to wipe out the Gryffindor line. I think that indicates that he intends to go beyond the use of harsh language."

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright. "Sod all this sitting around and waiting. Let's do something. Let's practice."

"Practice what? Human sacrifice?"

Harry got to his feet, and went over to where Godric's blade lay

propped against a table. He lifted it in his hand, startled as always at how well the time-mellowed metal of the hilt seemed to conform to the shape of his hand. "This," he said.

Draco got to his feet, his eyes quizzical. "You want to fight?"

"I want to practice. I´ve been chained up for two days. I want the exercise."

Draco got slowly to his feet. "All right."

Draco picked up his sword, and walked to the center of the room. He turned and faced Harry, and saluted. Harry returned the gesture back so exactly it was almost a mockery, and raised his sword. Then whipped it through the air, offering Draco a very professional feint, followed by a jab past his guard that would have sliced Draco's arm if he hadn´t spun away. He heard the fabric of his shirt part under the blade with a whisper, although the sword didn´t cut his skin. He glanced up at Harry in surprise.

And Harry grinned. *I´ve gotten better. Haven´t I?*

He *had* gotten better. This, of course, should have been impossible. Draco could only assume that this was a result of their strengthened mental connection. He had nearly forgotten the pleasure of fencing with someone who was a match for him. The swords struck against each other with the light, regular rapidity of piano keys striking home -- and in Draco's ears they made their own, very pleasant music. It was interesting, he thought, that although Harry had absorbed his knowledge of swordplay from Draco directly, he had nevertheless developed his own style. He fought like he played Quidditch, instinctively and without any fear. Which was a good quality when it came to Quidditch; less so with swordplay, where an understanding of the mortal potential of one´s actions was integral. He also fought directly, with much forward motion. Draco himself fought with cautious treachery, having been taught the tricks of betrayal by his father, although he did not use them here. Not on Harry.

He brought his sword in from the side, and then, just as Harry

moved to block and reply, he glanced over Harry's shoulder and saw that Salazar Slytherin was standing by the entrance to the cell, watching them.

He stopped dead. He was vaguely aware of a flash of silver at the corner of his eyes, and then Harry's voice exploded into his brain.

*Jesus, Malfoy, I almost killed you! Why the hell didn't you block me--*

*Look behind you.*

Harry turned slowly. And froze. And took a step back. They were shoulder to shoulder now, facing Slytherin. Who stood with his long arms crossed, one white finger against his chin, his eyes black and unreadable.

Finally, Draco found his voice, or at least a voice. It sounded a little squeakier than he would have liked. "You followed me," he said to Slytherin.

"I did not," said the Snake Lord, uncrossing his arms and propelling himself off the wall. "I came here for the Heir of Gryffindor. I was not expecting to see *you*." He looked from Harry to Draco and back again. "I must say I'm not at all sure what to think," Slytherin went on, and his voice was low. "Here is my Heir, trying, to all appearances, to kill the Heir of Gryffindor. Which is admirable behavior on his part, and should be applauded. And yet. And yet I have to ask myself. Why did he not just run our enemy through while he was chained to the wall? Why release him, and not just release him, but arm him with weaponry? It makes no sense."

Draco didn't say anything. He stood with his hand tight on the hilt of the sword. He didn't move, because he couldn't.

It was Harry who spoke, Harry who looked at Slytherin with two smoldering green coals of eyes, and spoke in a voice that was deadly. "I told him that the only reason you were ever able to kill Godric is that you snuck up and stabbed him in the back. It's in the history books. You're famous all right - a famous coward. And I

asked him if he wanted the Slytherin line to be famous as cowards forever."

Slytherin's eyes flicked away from Harry. Draco got the feeling that he hated Harry so much that it actually hurt Slytherin to look at him. He looked at Draco instead.

"So he baited you," he said. "And you let him."

Draco cleared his throat. "I wanted a fair fight."

"A *fair* fight. There's no such thing." Slytherin shook his head. But his eyes were amused. "Very well then. Leveler heads than yours have allowed themselves to be swayed by such mockery. I suppose it speaks well of you, that you wish to defend the honor of our House. So. Carry on."

Draco gaped at him. "*What?*"

"You heard me," said Slytherin. "Carry on." He leaned back against the wall. "It's rather amusing."

Draco stared.

"Do as I say," the Snake Lord said.

Draco looked at Harry. Who raised his sword, and shrugged. He looked pale, but not with fear or consternation. His face was set and a little distant. So his father's ghost had looked, when met in the afterlife. Harry met Draco's eyes steadily. *How long can we stall for?*

Automatically, Draco raised his arm, and saluted. Harry returned the gesture. *Stall? You mean until the others get here?*

Harry feinted towards him. *That's what I mean.*

It took Draco a moment to respond, and block him. The swords rang against each other, striking sparks. *I can't believe we're going to do this.* Then he broke off, as Harry's sword came at him again, this time cutting from above. Draco blocked him, without much

enthusiasm.

Harry's eyes met his over the flashing metal. *Like you mean it, Malfoy.*

*Fine.*

Harry's blade cut low, and Draco sprang away from it, crouching as he came down as he had been taught by his father, and thrust his own blade in under Harry's guard. The tip of it lightly cut the material of Harry's shirt, before flicking away.

Harry blinked. *Maybe not that much like you mean it.*

Draco glanced at him quickly. *Did I hurt you?*

*Doesn't matter.* An infinitesimal shake of Harry's head. *Cut me if you have to cut me.*

From the corner of his eye, Draco could see Slytherin, watching them. He was smiling.

*Well,* said Draco, *if you're going to be like that about it --* and with a grin he brought his sword up, hard, with all the force of his arm behind it. And Harry raised his own sword to reply. In midair they struck together. Braced for the expected sound of the blades ringing together, the grinding of shattered metal that followed took Draco completely by surprise. He stumbled forward, caught off guard, as his own Living Blade (mistaking, it seemed, the sincerity of his intentions) cut through Gryffindor's sword as if it had been made of glass. His blade shattered in half, Harry swore, startled, and put up his free hand to catch Draco and steady him.

Together they stood as still, staring down at the ruined sword. The blade had broken into three parts that lay now about Harry's feet. It was destroyed.

"Well," said Slytherin, breaking the stunned silence with a hiss of barely-concealed delight, "Who would have thought that Godric's blade would be made of such shoddy stuff? I told him those cheap

Gypsy tinkers were no good, but would he listen? And now look." He voice had reached a pitch of amusement that grated on Draco's nerves like needle sawing across violin strings. "Kill him, Draco," the Snake Lord added, waving an imperious arm.

Draco looked at Harry. Harry looked back. His hair was pasted to his forehead in sweaty black question marks. He didn't look the least bit worried. In fact, he looked as if he were trying not to laugh. *Damn that shoddy Gypsy workmanship.*

Draco felt his hands shaking. Adrenaline was still surging through him in explosive bursts. *Oh shut up, Potter.*

*If only this thing came with a warranty.*

*I MEAN it, shut up.*

"He's unarmed," said Draco, pitching his voice louder so that Slytherin could hear him.

"Yes, and doesn't that make it much easier to kill him?" Slytherin pointed out. "Consider it a shortcut."

"It's dishonorable," said Draco shortly. "That was the whole point of this."

"He fought you. His weapon was inferior. It was a fair fight. The fight is over. Kill him."

Draco shook his head. "Get him another sword."

"There is no other sword that can stand against a living blade," snapped Slytherin, sounding impatient.

"Then we could duel another way. Get me another sword. Whatever you have to do to make this a fair fight."

"We could wrestle," said Harry, looking innocent.

Draco fought the urge to kick him in the ankle. "I wasn't taught to

take advantage of an unarmed opponent--"

"You were taught to do as you should!" shouted Slytherin, losing his temper at last. "Do you expect me to think that your father taught you to show mercy to your enemies? The Malfoy family has not lasted a thousand years on that philosophy!"

Draco's face twisted into a snarl. "I won't do it," he said, jaw set, eyes intractable. "I am not a coward. Maybe you had to kill Godric by sneaking up on him. But I am not like you."

"You," said Slytherin, his eyes on Draco, full of light and hate. "You are exactly like me, and your duty is to me, and to the line which made you what you are."

"Who are you to think you know what I am?" said Draco, in a voice as sharp as crystal, and as transparent. Scorn was in it, and rage, and fear, and a little of the wild delight of rebellion.

"You defy me?" Slytherin's eyes scraped over Draco like knives. "This should be impossible," he said, clearly and a little feverishly. "The enchantments on you are what they are, perfect. I can only conclude that it is you who are defective."

*I've been telling you that for years.* It was Harry's voice in his head, amused and detached and gentle, and it didn't really matter what he said, just that he said *something*. The sound of his voice was like sanity, an anchor to reality. Draco looked at him and saw that Harry had let go his broken sword and was looking at him, his eyes dark and brilliant green, and over Harry's shoulder he could see Slytherin watching them both.

"You don't know what I am," Draco said again, his voice soft with menace. "I don't even know what I am. But I do know what I'm not. I'm *not* your Heir." As the Snake Lord, his face white as bleached bone, took a step towards him, and another, Draco raised the sword, pointing the tip of the blade towards Slytherin, his feet balanced lightly, as his father had taught him. "I'm *not* your general. I'm not *anything* belonging to you," he said, and felt something inside him lighten, a weight lifting at last.

He was barely aware of Harry watching him, was barely even aware of what he was saying, *knew* that he couldn't kill Slytherin, not even with his enchanted sword, but in that moment felt perfectly happy to die trying. He gripped the sword tighter as Slytherin took another step in his direction, and another, and then a last, sideways step, and Draco realized in a split and blinding and horrible second that Slytherin wasn't walking towards *him* at all.

And froze, as he realized -- but by that moment it was already too late, for, having taken several swift steps forward, Slytherin seized Harry firmly by the back of his shirt and thrust him forward as hard as he could onto the outstretched blade of Draco's sword.

And Draco knew what it was like, suddenly and dreadfully and unforgettably, to kill another human being with a Living Blade.

The blade sliced straight through Harry's body. Draco saw Harry's eyes fly wide open and look straight into his own before he staggered back, yanking the blade free, too late. It slid noiselessly out of Harry's body, red to the hilt.

Draco stood where he was, holding the sword, too appalled to move. And opposite him stood Slytherin, his pale hands lightly dappled with blood, holding Harry close, almost as if he were appalled by what he had done.

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#### References:

- 1)"And behold my success." Buffy.
- 2)"Think how much worse it would be if life was fair, and all the awful things that happened to us happened because we actually deserve them. I for one take great comfort in the completely impersonal hostility of the universe." Babylon Five.
- 3)"It does in the eyes of everyone with eyes." -- Red Dwarf.



4) I will do such things, I know not what but they will be the terrors of the earth." King Lear.

5) "I know it is very cold in this dungeon. I will not pass judgment."  
The X-Files.

## DRACO SINISTER

### Chapter Fourteen- Blood of the Founders

Draco did not move as Slytherin took another step back, away from the spot where Harry lay on the floor, on his side, his head on his arm. He looked as if he were asleep. His glasses were still on. Draco thought that didn't look very comfortable, and would have knelt down and taken them off, except that he was hampered by the fact that he couldn't move. He stood where he was as the bloodstained sword dropped out of his loosening fingers and clattered on the clear adamantine floor. Draco didn't hear it. He was looking at Harry.

*<He saw Harry when he was eleven years old, sitting astride his broomstick, reaching his hand out for the Remembrall, telling Draco to give it back, the clear light of dislike and defiance burning in the back of his green eyes>*

Slytherin took a step forward over Harry where he lay on the floor, and came up to Draco. He took him by the arms and seemed to be saying something to him. Whatever it was, he was saying it very loudly. Draco looked at him without expression; at the center of the static motionless whirlpool he had fallen into, there was no room for any words. He heard no part of what was said to him, nor did he care. It didn't matter.

*<He saw Harry on one side of a cage whose bars were made of light. And Harry slashed his palm open with a knife that flared silver in the darkness, and held his bloody hand through the bars, his face white with pain and determination>*

Slytherin shook him, hard, hands on his shoulders, and the next words he spoke broke in through the confusion flooding Draco's mind like pebbles striking through water. "Don't tell me you never wished he was dead," he said.

*<He saw Harry standing at the edge of the quarry, half-transparent with the stars shining through the outline of his hair and face and hands and Harry took a step towards him. You wouldn't hurt me, he said>*

"Ungrateful child," said the Snake Lord. Draco felt Slytherin's grip on his arms loosen as he stepped back and looked from his Heir, to Harry, and back again, and smiled a smile laced with poison.

"Wherever he is gone now," he said, indicating Harry with a jerk of the chin, his eyes on Draco, "remember that it was your hand that sent him there."

And having released his grasp, he turned his back on Draco and walked towards the wall. The dark opening appeared, and he vanished through it.

Now Draco did move. Not so much out of volition as out of the fact that his legs had given out. He hit the floor of the cell on his hands and knees, and crawled to kneel next to Harry. He reached to touch Harry's shoulder, to straighten the dark head, turning Harry's face towards him. As he did so he saw that his own hands were splashed with tiny flecks of blood and the blood came off on Harry where he touched him.

"Harry," he said. It was reflexive. Not quite having managed to accept it, he still assumed Harry was already dead. And yet it was impossible. Surely, if Harry was dead, he would feel it, surely that part of Harry he had carried inside him since the Polyjuice potion had linked them together would die, would sputter and be extinguished, and, having dwelled as two souls in one body for these past months, surely he would feel that amputation with the pain of a physical wound. Instead, all he felt was a pattern of this deadly numbness that seemed to go on and on and on without stopping.

*Don't tell me you never wished he was dead.*

He remembered standing on the Quidditch pitch, fifth year, and the crowds shrieking in the stands as Harry landed, the sunlight striking sparks off the Snitch in his upraised hand, and Harry smiling, looking towards Ron and Hermione in the stands, smug in his

victory. He remembered Dex Flint saying *"You´re an exceptional Seeker, Malfoy, the best we could hope for, but Potter will always be just that little bit better than you."* And he remembered loathing Harry for that, and maybe he had wanted him dead, and over such a stupid thing, such a stupid little thing as *Quidditch*.

A coldness seemed to be spreading out from his stomach, coupled with nausea, and he fought it down, *not* thinking about watching Hermione run towards Harry across the grass in front of Slytherin´s castle and hurl her arms around him, even though Draco was the one who had rescued her, Harry hadn´t done much of anything but stand there, and even with love potion in her veins it still wasn´t enough, it was never enough, and had he hated him then, had he wanted him dead, had he wished it?

He felt his own voice bubble up from his throat as if he had no control over it. *"Harry."*

And Harry *moved*. His eyelids flickered and raised themselves, his eyes widened, and he looked around him, as if he had just woken up from a dream.

Draco felt his hand spasmodically close on Harry´s shoulder, fingers digging in. Harry´s eyes flicked to his. They were wide, the green irises peculiarly lambent, like far-off and unreachable water. "I don´t feel anything," Harry said, and the blood ran out from under his body across the floor, more scarlet than the Gryffindor lion, crimson jewelry against the adamantine blue. "Did...did it miss me?"

Draco remembered the sensation of his fist striking against Harry´s chest as the sword buried itself to the hilt there. He said, rather wildly, "Yes. Yes, it must have."

Harry´s eyes narrowed. "You´re lying." His voice was bizarrely steady. "I felt it go through my chest." He coughed. "Your hands are all bloody," he said.

Draco looked down at his hands, then back at Harry. Pressure like a shriek of anguish beat behind his eyes. Somehow it seemed very important to him to stay as calm as possible and not alarm or startle

Harry, who perhaps had gone to a place where pain couldn't reach him. It seemed to him almost as though if he could keep Harry from knowing how badly he had been, must be, hurt, then the hurt, ignored, might go away. He remembered suddenly Helga's voice, which was like Ginny's, speaking to him in that vaguely gray place of shadows, *Be kind to him. He is only a child, and he has his death wound.*

"It's all right," he said to Harry. His hands went to his own throat, and undid the bronze pins that held his cloak together. He took it off, folded it flat, and slid it under Harry's head. Harry didn't say anything. Nor did he move, only his eyes, passing over Draco, over the room itself, as if these were things he had never seen before. He was very white.

"Just stay still," Draco said. He wished desperately there were someone else here with him. Sirius, or Hermione, or someone, as he had when faced with the shades of Harry's parents. Knowing that while he had words for almost every occasion - brittle words and clever words and words that cut like steel - he had no words to comfort or to console, had never been taught comfort or consolation or the telling of necessary lies. *You'll be fine*, he should say. *Hang in there, Potter.* But he couldn't.

"I *am* dying. That sword can kill anything," Harry said then, and his restless eyes stopped roaming and fixed on Draco. "I *must* be dying. But I don't feel like I'm dying. I just feel cold."

"I could get you something--a blanket -"

Harry's hand closed on Draco's arm, above his wrist, just below where the Dark Mark burned like a black sun on his forearm.

"Don't. Stay here." He half-closed his eyes. "Something's happening to me."

Dazedly, and with a curious certainty, Draco thought, *but it can't happen now, not with me watching.* As if anxious vigilance could hold back the inevitable, as if his own gaze was all that stood between Harry and death. He could feel a pulse beating weakly in the hand that held his wrist, and wondered dimly if he would feel

the moment that it stopped. He wanted to pull away from Harry's grasp on him, take him by the shoulders and shake him, shake him as if he were merely falling asleep and could be startled awake, shake the life back into him. But you couldn't go around shaking people who had just been stabbed through the heart. He heard his own breath catch, as if he couldn't quite get enough air, and there was a burning sensation behind in his eyes, as if they had been rubbed with sandpaper, and the faint pulse in the hand that held his arm beat and beat and beat steadily and then not so steadily as it suddenly sped up like a jackhammer and he nearly jumped back, shocked, as Harry's eyes flew open and he gasped suddenly, his hand tightening convulsively and with incredible force on Draco's wrist, nails cutting into his skin.

Draco stared. Instead of leaving Harry's face, color seemed to be flooding into it, a hectic red like a fever, the shades of life returning, the vivid eyes, and the chiaroscuro of the skin. His face was as it had been in the minutes before the sword ran through him - anxious, flushed, alive. A shudder passed through him, his shoulders lifting off the floor -- he jumped as if something had stung him, and with a hitching gasp - sat up.

Draco grabbed at his shoulders, trying to steady him. But Harry didn't need steadying. Draco felt the wetness of the cloth under his own fingers where blood had soaked through the back of Harry's shirt. And yet. Harry was sitting upright, wide-eyed, gasping a little. They stared at each other, both dazed with the impossibility of what was happening. Harry couldn't be sitting up, he couldn't, it was sheer impossibility. By all rights he should be dead, and by the look on his face, he knew it.

Harry stared at Draco. "It went through me -" he said. "It went right through me -"

Draco tightened his grip on Harry's shirt, the blood-soaked material knotting between his fingers. "Can you breathe? You can breathe?"

Harry looked bewildered. "I can breathe fine." He blinked up at Draco. The ghostly look was gone from his eyes. He no longer looked as if he were gazing at some invisible country no one else could see.

There was a vivid high color in his face, as if he had been playing Quidditch in cold weather, but there was something missing from his expression and Draco realized with a jolt that he no longer looked as if he were feeling any pain.

"Harry," he heard himself say, "*What's going on?*"

Harry shook his head, then let go Draco's arm, and his fingers went to his shirt, scrabbling at the buttons, nearly tearing the material. It came off and he had a t-shirt on under it. There was a rip in the shirt where the blade had gone through, just over his heart, and the rip was lined with blood. With shaking hands, Harry took the hem of the shirt in his grasp and pulled it up to his chin. And looked down at himself, eyes wide and brilliant with disbelief.

The Epicyclical Charm glittered on his chest, at the end of its chain, just above his heart, where a dark red line was all the evidence that remained to show that a blade had been driven in there with enough force to pierce the cage of his ribs and drive itself out through his back.

And as he looked, and Draco looked, in utter insurmountable astonishment, the mark faded even more. Now it was a faint red line.

Harry spun around, craning his head over his shoulder. "My back. Look at my back."

Draco looked. The back of Harry's shirt was cut and bloody, but -- "Nothing." His voice sounded faint and tinny to his own ears. "Not any mark at all."

Harry turned, tugging his shirt back down. His face was childlike with disbelief. "It doesn't make any sense." He looked down at his t-shirt, and touched his fingers to the bloody rip in the cloth. He began to get to his feet, and staggered. Draco stood up himself, and caught Harry's arm. Harry let him, seemingly too bewildered and preoccupied to even notice the contact.

"Harry, maybe you shouldn't -"

"I'm fine." Harry gave a little choking noise between a laugh and a gasp. "I'm fine, you saw me. What *happened*?" He turned to Draco, as if seeing him for the first time. "Was it some kind of trick?"

Draco looked at him with wary and astonished concern. "Don't you remember?"

"I do remember. That's the problem." His eyes suddenly widened, staring over Draco's shoulder. Draco let go of him and watched him as he walked a few steps away and knelt down next to Slytherin's sword, which lay where Draco had dropped it, still scarlet with his blood. Harry reached out a hand, touched the blade, and then retracted his fingers, staring. When he got to his feet and turned around to look at Draco his eyes were burning with an intense green fire. "I felt it go through my heart," he said. "It went right through my heart but it didn't kill me. What does that mean?"

Draco shook his head. He couldn't shake the feeling that this was some peculiar dream he was having and that Harry really was dead. People's minds did snap when events became too much for them to cope with, didn't they? Perhaps they'd let him have his father's old cell in St. Mungo's. "I don't know," he said, with complete honesty. "You are the Boy Who Lived. It's not your first time...surviving something."

"This is *different*," said Harry, and the dazed wonderment made his eyes look cloudy. "I felt it go through me. Like white fire." Suddenly he reached down and seized the sword by the hilt. He stood up, and held it out towards Draco, point-first.

"Do it again," he said.

Draco stared at him, honestly befuddled. "Do what again?"

Harry looked determined. His eyes burned with a green and stellar intensity. "I want to see what happens."

"What happens if ...." Draco's voice trailed off as he gazed at Harry. "You're not serious."



"I am. Run me through again."

"No," said Draco, backing away. He couldn't retreat very far though, because there was a wall behind him. He felt it against his back, holding him up, with a certain relief.

"Come on. If it didn't kill me once..."

"No. You've lost a lot of blood, you're not rational." Draco remembered being in the infirmary at Hogwarts after Buckbeak had slashed him with his talons, the sleeve of his robe soaking wet with blood and Madam Pomfrey looking at him with weary concern. *Do you feel tired? Weak? Are you seeing spots in front of your eyes? Hallucinations?* "Harry....you should sit down."

Harry's chest was rising and falling as if he had been running. "I don't want to sit down. I feel like I could run twenty miles without stopping. I don't feel weak at all." He raised his head, and looked at Draco with the same dazed and slightly drunken look. "Nothing can hurt me."

"You don't *know* that," said Draco, half-desperately, and reached forward and knocked the sword out of Harry's hand. Harry made no effort to hold onto it, and it clattered to the ground between them.

"Look, it didn't kill me the first time."

"And this makes you anxious to experience it again?"

"I want to know," said Harry. "What's wrong with me? I should be dead. That should have killed me. It didn't. I want to see what happens if you do it again."

"You already saw it once," said Draco. "Look, I'm sorry if you got distracted and missed it. Once was enough for me. No repeat performances."

Harry just looked at him. His shirt had not yet dried and trails of

blood like unraveling crimson threads stole down his right arm. And yet his face was full of color and life, his eyes bright - too bright. He looked like someone with a fever. This was not Harry, not calm sensible Harry who was as far from having a death wish as anyone Draco had ever met.

His next thought broke from him without any effort on his part to control or hold it back. *Think about what you´re asking me to do.*

It took a moment for Harry to react. He blinked, and seemed to be fighting something down - anger or disappointment or fear or even tears, it was impossible to tell. "I need to know," he said, his voice rasping through his throat. "If I can die."

"I can answer that for you without any messy sort of impalings," said a voice, silky but steel-spined, from the corner of the room. "The answer is yes."

Draco whirled and stared. And felt his mouth fall open.

Ranged against the far wall were six tall figures in belted robes. They had heads, arms, and legs, but were not human. Their skin was scaley, dark gray and patchy in places, their eyes red and whirling, their heads knobbed and lumpy. The tallest of them stood in front, and in its hand it held cupped a single flame, that flickered with an emerald fire. It seemed to be smiling, whether at him or at Harry it was hard to tell. He knew without knowing how that this was the one who had spoken, and his belief was confirmed when it spoke again, its voice like iron now. "You can die, Harry Potter. And if you let your friend stab you again, you will."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I´m sorry," Ben said again.

Ginny barely heard him. She had her hands over her face and was staring at the darkness behind her lids, at nothingness. *How could I have been so stupid?* she thought.

"I could give you something to bring back with you," she heard him say, his voice tinged with pity and anxiety. "Weapons...?"

"Weapons aren't any good without someone to use them," said Ginny, and took her hands away from her face. "Never mind. It's not your fault." She took a deep breath and Ben's face swam into focus. She couldn't quite read his expression. Which wasn't that surprising, considering that she didn't, in fact, know him at all. His surface resemblance to Harry was so strong that she somehow felt that he could solve things for her, as Harry had always solved things for all of them. But he wasn't Harry; he wasn't even anyone she knew. She got to her feet, feeling suddenly miserable and desperate to get away. "There's nothing you can do, then. I should go back."

"Wait." Ben caught at her arm as she stood up from the table. "Don't tell me there's *nothing* I can do. It sounds like you're fighting a losing battle and -"

"It's not *your* battle." Disappointment beat behind her eyes like a drumbeat.

"It is, though. Slytherin killed my father, remember."

Ben spoke very quietly, and Ginny glanced up at him. He had a bit of the expression that Harry got when he was talking about his parents. Closed off.

"There a reason I'm here," he said. "Waiting here. In front of this castle."

"I know...I'm sorry. How did...what about your mother?"

"I was so young when she died, I only know what people told me," said Ben. "It was right around the beginning of the war. The Snake Lord had just come to power and was wreaking havoc on the wizarding world. Recruiting giants and dragons to serve him, destroying whole armies, making them vanish -"

*Vanish.*

Ginny suddenly sat up so quickly that she knocked her chair over. It clattered on the floor behind her. She was hearing Fleur's voice in her head.

"Ben," she said hoarsely.

He looked up at her.

She was gripping the edge of the table so hard her hands hurt. "Fleur - a friend of mine once told me that Slytherin had made an entire army vanish into thin air," she said. "Is that true? Was it more than once?"

Ben replied slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "It was just once," he said. "It was when I was ten years old. An army was sent out from Ravenclaw, a company of about two hundred and fifty, men and warriors and beasts. They never arrived at their destination."

"Ben," said Ginny again. "What if the reason they never arrived wasn't because Slytherin made them vanish. What if it was because *we brought them forward into the future?*"

Ben goggled at her. Really goggled. His eyes widened and his mouth fell open and she realized that she had, truly, astonished him. Amid the whirling chaos of her thoughts, she felt somewhat proud about this.

"But..." he began, still staring. "We can't...go back...I mean...and...it would change history."

"No, it wouldn't," said Ginny staunchly. "It's already happened."

There was another long silence while Ben stared at her across the table. Rather like Harry's did, his hair was standing up around his head as if mirroring his surprise, like a crown of unruly black leaves. It was rather cute, just as it was cute on Harry.

"How old are you?" she said abruptly.

Ben found his voice. "That might work," he said, sounding stunned. "Your idea. It's totally insane. But also, brilliant. And I'm twenty-two."

"That's kind of old," she said, without thinking.

Ben looked at her quizzically. "Old for what?"

"I was just thinking..." she stammered. "That I really did miss my goal by quite a few years when I tried to come back here. At least ten. I'm going to have to be a lot more careful when we go back to get the army."

"When, not if?" Ben was smiling. "Confident, aren't you?"

"I have to be," said Ginny. "This is really my only hope. And if I can't be accurate enough with the Time Turner, it'll never work."

"Magnifying a Time Turner's accuracy isn't so difficult if you have the right tools. All you have to do is accentuate the metamorphosis of the synchronicity between the temporal infrastructures."

Now it was Ginny's turn to goggle.

"How do you know so much about time-travel?" asked Ginny.

"From Helga," he said, resting his chin in his hand. "She and Rowena really helped bring me up. My own mother died when I was a baby. And Helga never had any sons, only daughters, so I think she felt a bit as if I was hers. In fact, I should show you something."

Ginny looked after him as he got up and went into another room of the tent. When he returned, he was carrying a stack of books. She watched curiously as he sat down, and opened the topmost of the books. It was much larger than almost any book Ginny had seen before, except a few that were kept in the Antiquities section of the library and which students were prevented from touching with powerful Security Charms. The cover was of dark gold leather, stamped with gold along the spine. "You do know about the

prophecies, don't you?" he asked.

"I know there's a prophecy that the Heir of Slytherin will rise up and wreak havoc on the wizarding world," said Ginny reluctantly.

"So there is," said Ben. "There's also a prophecy that the Heir of Gryffindor will bring him to destruction, and that the Heir of Slytherin will help."

"Don't those run in conflict with each other?"

Ben nodded. "That usually means that there's some event, some kind of turning point, that could go either way. The outcome of that moment determines which prophecy is correct for your reality. It might have already happened, and it might not have. You wouldn't know."

"And maybe the Heir of Gryffindor that brings him to destruction isn't Harry," said Ginny. "Maybe it's you."

Ben blinked, as if this had not occurred to him. "When my father died," he said slowly, "he cursed his murderer. The death-curse of a wizard with Slytherin blood is a powerful thing and they often come to pass."

"What was the curse?"

Ben shook his head. He had that closed look again. It was almost like seeing Draco's expression on Harry's face. "I don't know - I don't think anybody is sure what his words were."

Ginny thought it best to change the subject. Over the years, she had certainly learned that Heirs of Gryffindor tended to be very closed-mouthed when discussing how their parents were killed by wizards from the house of Slytherin. "So you can show me how to modify the Time Turner, or whatever it was you said before?"

"That," he said, looking at the table, "is probably not the best approach." Ginny's heart sunk again. The plan she'd been forming in her head since Ben first mentioned what needed to be done to the

Time Turner crumbled to the ground as she watched him and then he lifted up his hand and snapped his fingers once, hard. There was a rustle of wings, and a small apricot-colored horned owl lifted off its perch near the door with a soft *who*, and came to rest on his arm. He took a roll of parchment from the owl's leg, smoothed it out, picked a quill up off the table, and wrote several short lines. Finished, he rolled his letter back up, tied it to his owl's leg, and sent the bird off with another snap of his fingers. He watched it go, seeming lost in thought.

After a moment, Ginny cleared her throat. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Well," said Ben, "you can't expect me just to go a dozen years into the past with you without leaving anyone a note saying where I'm going, can you?"

Ginny felt a huge smile begin to spread across her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The same Zonko's pencils? The ones you used to draw the Marauder's Map?" There was an aching wistful tone to Ron's voice that nearly made Sirius smile. "I can't believe it."

"Here," he said. "You can see them if you want."

He pushed the small box of pencils through the gap in the wall, and saw Hermione's small hand come forward to retrieve it. As he drew his own hand back, a flash of light caught the edge of his silver bracelet and the Vivicus charm seemed to dim for a moment.

He seized at his wrist with his other hand, getting to his feet and staring. It hadn't been a trick of the light - the Vivicus stone had flickered. He was sure of it. He felt his heart pound against his chest as he stared at the glowing light in the heart of the stone. It certainly wasn't flickering any more, if anything it had grown in intensity and steadiness, the red stone shining like a small sun.

*Harry.*

Hermione's voice pulled him partway out of his reverie. "Sirius," she called, her voice muffled by the stone wall between them. "Did you draw the Map?"

"No," Sirius replied absently. "Remus did, and Peter helped. They were better draftsmen than James or I were."

"So you don't know how they managed to make it...come to life?"

Sirius released his wrist and looked over towards the gap in the wall through which Hermione's voice had come. An idea had come to nigger at the back of his brain. "Well, they stole the school floor plans, and traced them over with the Zonko's pencils. They've stopped making those pencils, you know. They're meant to make drawings come to life, but they tend to work a little too well."

"Too well?" Ron's voice now, sounding curious.

"Well, they made things come to life but they worked in odd ways. So you could draw a bowl of porridge that you could actually eat, if you concentrated hard enough. But it would give you horrid stomach pangs. I could tell you a story about James and a cranberry scone, but I won't. Or you could draw a broom you could fly on, but they did often tend to lose power in midflight. There were some nasty accidents. Why?" he added, and as the word left his lips there was a groaning, creaking sound and a section of the wall between his cell and the one holding Hermione and Ron suddenly vanished. Actually it didn't so much vanish as swing outward with a creak as if it were hinged. Which, Sirius realized a moment later, it was. A squarish section of wall had been transformed into a door, and on the other side of the door stood Ron, and next to him Hermione, a Magical Reality pencil in her hand and an astonished look on her face.

"I really didn't think it would work..." she murmured, gazing upward.

"You drew a door," said Sirius, shaking his head in amazement,



although he'd long ago accepted that Hermione was a sight cleverer than anyone had a right to be.

"It's a bit crooked," said Ron appraisingly, stepping through it so that he was now in Sirius' cell. Hermione looked mildly affronted. "Not that that matters - it worked," he added quickly.

"It doesn't really help us, though, does it," said Hermione, a bit mournfully. "I mean, we can't draw on the bars. They're too far apart."

Sirius looked at them both thoughtfully. "Which one of you is the better artist?" he said.

They both looked at him consideringly for a moment; then Hermione said, "Ron is."

"Give him the pencils, then," said Sirius.

Hermione obeyed and Ron stood holding the box of pencils and looking at Sirius as if he were just a bit mad. "Do you want me to draw you a cranberry scone?" he said.

"No," said Sirius. "I want you to draw me the cell where Harry and Draco are. From memory. Do you think you can?"

Ron glanced at Sirius and then at Hermione, who was staring at him hopefully. "I can try," he said. "Have you got any parchment?"

Sirius shook his head. "I want you to draw it as close to life-sized as you can. On the wall, over there. And..."

Ron looked at him. "What?"

"Try to hurry."

It took almost the whole box of pencils for Ron to complete the sketch. The lead in the pencils was very soft, and the wall very rough. Ron worked slowly, grinding each pencil down to its nub, scraping his fingertips against the stone until they bled. Sirius and

Hermione watched as quietly as they could as a rough image of the cell took shape: the high walls, the clutter of furniture, the tapestries with their embroidered dragons and their motto *In Hoc Signo Vinces*.

Finally, Ron stepped back, clutching the stub of the last a pencil in his hand. "That's all I can do," he said.

"All right. The power is there. I can feel it." Sirius was struck by the sensation emanating from Ron's sketch, almost as if the boy had put a little of his own magic into the drawing. It was so reminiscent of the feeling he'd had when Wormtail first handed him the Marauder's Map, the feeling that great and terrible things could happen just by using it. He glanced at the sketch and smiled as two dots labeled "Harry Potter" and "Draco Malfoy" popped into view, but felt flooded with concern when six more dots with labels like Udrovad and Fenudeel appeared on the wall.

"What are those?" Hermione asked nervously

"I don't know, but they're not moving," Sirius replied. He had expected Harry to be alone in the cell, perhaps with Draco, but certainly not with a contingent of Slytherin's minions. And they didn't have their wands, but if his plan worked, they would have the element of surprise. He turned to Ron and Hermione in turn and asked, "Are you ready to go through? You'll have to concentrate on their cell, your memories of it, the way it feels to stand in there and look at the walls and the ceiling. Don't think of this dungeon at all."

"What about you? You haven't been in there, so what can you concentrate on?" Ron asked.

"Take my hands," Sirius insisted, pocketing the last of the pencils. "My focus will be on Draco and Harry, and I think a combination of that and your efforts will pull us through." The three of them moved silently in front of the drawing, and they concentrated on the cell, and on Draco and Harry, and recalled them. Sirius could almost feel the pulse of his charm at his wrist as he concentrated on the drawing and the boys. The magic from the pencils was still there, for as he gazed at the lines of the drawing on the wall, they seemed to

leap out into three dimensions, gathering reality to them. Sirius heard footsteps which he knew were not his, and saw a faint blue glow bleed out from the drawing on the wall.

As one, they stepped forward, closing their eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It just never stops, does it?" said Draco resignedly, staring at the demons. "What are you all doing here?"

"We were invited," said the head demon speculatively.

"I didn't invite you," said Draco positively. He turned to Harry, who was still looking dazed and a little drunk. Draco sighed inwardly. Relieved as he was that Harry wasn't dead, he could have done without High on Life Harry at the moment. "Did *you* invite them?"

Harry shook his head. Draco turned back to the demons. "I don't suppose it would make any difference if I told you the toga party was down the hall?"

"Funny little mortal boy," said the head demon, and Draco decided that he really didn't like the emphasis that was put on the word *mortal*. "You did not summon us, or demand our presence. The sword did."

Draco looked at the sword. So did Harry. It lay as it had, dully gleaming on the bloodstained floor of the cell.

"Come again?" said Draco faintly.

*Maybe we should just jump them,* said Harry's voice in his head.

Draco swiveled his head around and looked at Harry with mounting dread. He was quite sure now that something very peculiar was going on with the black-haired boy. He just wasn't sure what. *We should do what?*

*Attack them. We´ve got the sword. It can kill anything. They won´t be expecting it.*

*We cannot just attack them. Even Draco´s mental voice dripped icicles. They are demons from Hell.*

Harry looked unimpressed. *So?*

*So?! So, they´re demons from Hell!*

*You say that like it means something.*

*Okay, Potter. Don´t take this the wrong way, but the best thing you could do for the both of us right now is sit down on the floor and put your head in a bag. Take deep breaths and think of a nice quiet place where nothing ever happens. Weasley´s bedroom for instance.*

*I bet they think they´re so great just because they´re demons, Harry said, looking resentfully across the room. Well, they´re not so great.*

*Don´t mock the demons, Potter.*

*Why not? Do you think they can hear us?*

*No. It´s just...not very classy.*

"Are you quite finished trying to convince your friend not to attempt hacking us to pieces?" demanded the lead demon, his bonfire voice cutting into Draco´s thoughts. "I can assure you that it would be a waste of time. We are spirit, not flesh."

"Bugger," said Draco, with feeling. "You *can* hear us."

"Your telepathy? No, we cannot. It was a logical extrapolation, given the effect of the healing magic on a human, especially a rather little one like your friend there."

"Harry is *not* little," said Draco indignantly, partly in defense of Harry and partly because, after all, he and Harry were the same size.

If they hadn't been, they couldn't have been such effective opposing Seekers. A moment later, thoughts of Quidditch vanished as the import of the demon's words hit him. "Healing magic? What healing magic?"

He glanced over at Harry, and had to admit that he did look as though *some* sort of magic had thrown its glamour over him - as if a light had been turned on inside him and was shining out through the slim glove of glowing flesh that covered his bones, through his bright emerald eyes, through the brilliant patches of red darkening his tanned cheeks.

"The flesh of a manticores heals wounds," said the head demon. "Its blood, when drunk, can revive those near death. When a human is drenched in it, as your friend here was, it imparts the special property of being able to survive one mortal blow. *One* mortal blow," said the demon, again. "It does not grant immortality. Only a very few kinds of magic do that."

"So I'm *not* immortal," said Harry slowly, as if the words were just beginning to sink in.

"Far from it," said the demon. "You are an ordinary mortal child. Well, there are a few things about you that stand out. That scar which connects you to the Dark Realms is very interesting and if we had more time I'd love to have a look at it, but we don't. Maybe we will have time later. No, little Harry Potter, you are mortal, and if stabbed again, you will bleed, and you will die, as the Snake Lord knows this. This euphoria you are feeling will soon lift. It is a side effect of the manticores' healing power, working in you."

"But the manticore is an evil creature," said Draco, still feeling dazed. "How can its blood heal?"

"The manticore is only an animal," said the demon, and there was a sharpness in its voice. "It is only a living being. Evil and good are the words you humans use to put a name to a purpose. But an animal is just an animal, a tool just a tool, a sword just a sword. It is the use you make of it that determines its nature. It could be said that that manticore saved the life of your friend with its own dying

blood, and how did you pay it for that? With steel and poison."

"It would have killed us," said Draco faintly, although in his ears he heard the voice of the mantichore as it died, *Why do you slay me, Master? It was you who made me what I am.*

"Probably," agreed the demon. "That was the purpose it was set to. To protect the Orb in its body. Because with the Orb removed, the Snake Lord once again has access to his powers. If you had died, instead of the mantichore, the Orb would not now be in his possession. In a way, it could be said that you delivered it to him."

Draco felt that this was twisting things quite a bit. Then again, nobody ever said demons played fair. "I don't understand why the sword called you here," he said irritably.

"Slytherin blood," said the demon, and looked pointedly at the sword, still scarlet to the hilt. "We were to be paid in the blood of a Magid of Slytherin descent, if not Slytherin himself. The sword alerted us it had taken the life of such a one. But it was wrong," the demon added, turning a gas-blue glare onto the very much alive Harry. "You're alive."

"I certainly am," said Harry cheerfully. "You know, you look a lot like the demon that attacked me in my Draco's bedroom not long ago. Is he one of you? Small, rather striking fellow with no ears?"

"You mean Strygalldwir," said the demon, looking unamused. "He is not among us. He was sent to warn you of Slytherin's design on you but, alas, was unsuccessful."

Draco went cold all over. "So, what, you're here to finish the job?" he demanded.

"Not exactly," said the demon. "We could take the life of the Gryffindor heir, certainly. But the exchange loses much of its power if the life is not offered freely. In that context, I'd like to offer you a bargain."

"A bargain? That's funny," Draco said, half under his breath.

Harry spoke in his head, sounding chipper. *Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?*

*Shut up, Potter, or I swear I'll beat you like a bongo drum.*

Harry sounded sulky. *Lighten up, Malfoy.*

Draco decided against lecturing Harry on the inappropriateness of lightening up when faced with demons demanding a blood sacrifice. It was quite novel being forced to be the serious one while Harry giggled his way through peril. Novel, but then again having his leg sawed off at the knee would also have been novel. He desperately wanted the old Harry back, as a calming influence. This Harry was about as calming as a small parrot that had just consumed a half pound tin of coffee beans.

Draco's mind darted about, seeking possible avenues of escape. He knew from his father that it was a very bad idea to make bargains with demons, or bargains with anyone. In fact *Malfoys don't bargain* was one of the Malfoy family rules, ever since one of his ancestors back in 1630 had sold his soul to the devil in exchange for being made Chief Warlock, with unforeseen consequences. And wasn't that how his father had died? Torn to pieces by a demon-Banishing spell gone wrong; he'd seen it in the Prophet.

*Come on, Malfoy. Harry again. It's better to live one hour as a tiger than a whole lifetime as a worm. That's an old Gryffindor saying.*

*Oh yeah? Well there's an old Malfoy saying, too. It goes "Who ever heard of a wormskin rug"?*

*Do something,* said Harry, sounding determined. *Or I will.*

Draco took a look at Harry, blood-splattered and fiercely determined, his green eyes burning like suns. This was the Harry that had faced down Voldemort in a duel, the Harry that had killed a basilisk with a sword when he was twelve years old, the Harry who always won at Quidditch because he was just that little bit less afraid. Only that Harry faced danger because he had to; this Harry

seemed...to want to.

Draco turned back to the demons. "What kind of bargain?"

The demon explained the original bargain between the forces of Hell and the Snake Lord. The explanation involved a certain amount of conjuring of ancient contracts with print so small that Draco imagined ants would have had a hard time reading the text. The demonic signature on the bottom was enflamed, and next to it was Slytherin's own black seal, the same skull with the serpent coming from its mouth that Draco could feel on his own left arm.

"See, here it says clearly that if we have to make more than two trips to collect the sword, further penalties will accrue," the demon noted as Draco tried to read some of the clauses. "Then, there are interest payments, terms of use, a very specific privacy clause which has prevented us from publicizing the terms of the agreement in the *Daily Prophet*, and do you see this?"

Draco squinted at the text. "The warranty disclaimer? Why would anyone sign a bargain with Hell without even a guarantee that what they were bargaining for wasn't going to break the first time he used it?"

"He did have a thirty day trial period, and there's a pretty good indemnification clause in there," the demon insisted, sounding aggrieved. Draco shook his head in disbelief. "But all of that is from times that have passed, mortal boy. The *completion* of the bargain is now at issue."

"Slytherin told me that until the Orb is opened and his life-spark released, you can't find him, and cannot take either the sword to meet the original bargain or his life, to cover the interest and penalties."

"He was correct," the demon said coldly.

"He also said," Draco said slowly, "that if he freely selects and presents to you the life of a Magid Heir who has Slytherin blood, then he can retrieve his powers from the Orb and keep the sword. Is



that correct too?" The demon nodded, and Draco considered the import of the contract's terms. "I know I can die, I did it last week. And you say Harry can be killed now too?"

The demon nodded again.

"So we have to open the Orb," said Draco slowly.

"If you do not, we cannot take the Snake Lord, and if we cannot take him, we cannot take the sword," said the demons. "We cannot even take it from you now, or believe us, we would have done so." His voice was bitter. "We *want* the sword. It is our right to hold it and our obligation to claim it. We have no use for Magids, and do not want you or your friend. In exchange for the boon your mother granted our fellow, we have agreed to grant you one moment of opportunity to fulfill this bargain in the manner of your choice."

Draco looked over at Harry. Harry was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking sulky, and generally being of no help. Draco turned back to the demons. "If you have no use for Magids, then why do you want Slytherin?" he demanded.

The demon grinned, showing that in fact it had not two but *three* rows of razor-sharp teeth. "Vengeance," it said. "He cheated us. In Hell, his torments will be excruciating and very...extensive."

"Good," said Draco, nodding. "If we open the Orb, you will be summoned to take him?" he said.

"Immediately," said the demons. "If you open the Orb, we will be summoned. We will reveal to you then how you If you can cause Slytherin to return the sword to us by his own hand, then the bargain will be fulfilled, and we will take the sacrifice as you choose it. We would prefer that you allow us to take the Snake Lord. Of course, if he reaches the Orb before you such a return occurs ... we will be forced to take our sacrifice as he offers it -- either your blood, or the Gryffindor's."

The demon's words were cold, precise and exact. Draco turned them over in his mind. Demons, he knew, did not lie; at least not

when conducting bargains, but there were often several shades of meaning to their statements. In this case, however, there seemed no choice but to trust them.

"It's a deal," he said.

Behind him Harry was muttering something about people who went around making deals with demons for no good reason. He was muttering quietly, however. Earlier he had made a bit of an attempt to rush forward and Draco had stiff-armed him back into the wall, knocking the wind out of him.

"We do realize the near impossibility of your task," said the demon, grinning with all its sets of teeth showing. "But even the sliver of a chance is better than none."

Draco shrugged. The sword was a comforting weight in his hand. He could sense the demon's greedy gaze upon it. "My father used to say, 'If you fall off a cliff, you might as well try to teach yourself to fly on the way down.'"

"What does that mean?" the demon demanded, blinking.

"No idea," said Draco. "I was hoping you would tell me."

The demon smiled again. "You do fancy yourself clever, and so you are," it said. "If we must take an Heir in the end, I do hope it's you," he added, looking at Draco directly. "I somehow imagine you could well keep the Master entertained. The colors of Hell would suit you, too. All that black and scarlet, with your fairness and silver hair. Lovely."

Draco wondered for a fleeting moment if the demon was hitting on him. Then he decided that that was very unlikely. It was merely trying to frighten him, and had succeeded, with a rather vivid and unpleasant mental image of a land beyond a black gate, where the sky was always blood-colored, a place much worse than the one where he had met Lily and James Potter.

"I doubt Hell ever welcomes anyone," he said thoughtfully. Beside

him, Harry looked at him, and he saw a flicker of something pass across his green eyes.

The demon raised its hand, and gestured towards the wall. The dark opening appeared there again as it had for Slytherin. "When we are summoned again, we *will* be paid," said the demon. "If not with the sword, then with blood."

They vanished, without even the decency of the \* pop\* of Disapparation to lessen the eeriness.

"Well, that was informative," he said, turning around to look at Harry. And jumped as a sudden shimmering rainbow refraction painted the wall on the opposite side of the room. It blurred, and without any warning, Sirius, Ron and Hermione appeared out of the wall, stepping forward as if they stepped through a door.

Draco blinked, but the vision stayed steady. It was Sirius, Ron and Hermione. They were filthy, but looked unharmed. He barely had a chance to get a look at them, though, before Harry bolted around him and ran towards them. Sirius, grinning hugely, threw his arms around Harry and hugged him so hard that Harry's feet lifted up off the floor. When Sirius put him down Hermione and Ron fell on him, and they all embraced each other in a flurry of arms and excited chatter.

Draco stood where he was, feeling awkward. He looked down at the floor and saw the sword at his feet. And blinked at it. Its hilt was devoid of any stain, as if it had drunk swallowed up the blood spilled on it. He suppressed an involuntary shudder, bent down, and took the hilt in his hand. When he straightened up, he saw that the others were still standing together. Sirius had his hand on Harry's shoulder, and Harry was talking in a sharp, excited voice, audible even across the room, "The cloak? They took my dad's cloak? We have to get it back -"

"What we have to do is get out of here before his minions get back," said Sirius, trying to turn Harry around to face him, but Harry pulled out of his grasp.

"It's the only thing I've got that belonged to my *father* -"

Sirius looked surprised. "Harry, this isn't like you."

Draco crossed the room to them before he was quite aware of what he was doing. "He's not exactly rational," he said, meeting Sirius' eyes, which were dark with doubt.

"I'm *fine*," said Harry, flushed with anger.

"You *know* you're not."

Sirius reached out and put his hand back on Harry's shoulder, and this time Harry didn't pull away. "Harry, I'm so sorry about James' cloak. There are other things I could give you that belonged to your father, though." Now Harry did turn and look at Sirius as his godfather reached into a pocket of his trousers and drew out something about the length of his hand, which looked like an intricately decorated little silver thimble, complete with a strap.

Harry looked at it. "Is that a *thimble*?"

Sirius smiled, the lines deepening at the corners of his eyes, then handed the object to his godson. The moment it touched Harry's hand it seemed to leap into life, and suddenly began to expand in size. Harry jumped as it grew and grew and became the scabbard for a longsword, carved all up and down with an intricate and beautifully colored design of leaves, birds and animals.

Draco didn't really look at it; he was looking at Harry's face, which had gone first very red, then white, and now the color was coming back again, and he simply looked amazed. Something else had changed in his expression, too, some of the fierceness seemed to have died out of his eyes.

Hermione was smiling nervously. "It's your Key, Harry," she said.

Harry didn't say anything. He looked at it mutely, then at Sirius. "It's a scabbard for a sword?" he said.

Sirius nodded. "For the Gryffindor sword."

"But the sword is broken," said Harry. He walked a little ways away, bent down, picked up the broken sword, and came back to the group. He showed it mutely to Sirius, who stared at the blade, broken almost in half just above the crossguard. "Not much use," said Harry flatly, "a scabbard without a sword."

"The sword's just a sword," said Hermione, "not a Living Blade. We can get you another sword."

Sirius was still staring at the shattered blade. "Harry, what happened? How did you break it?"

Harry hesitated. He looked over at Draco, who looked back at him steadily. "Tell them what happened."

"Which *part* of what happened?" asked Harry, shoving the broken sword into the scabbard and buckling it around his waist.

"Everything," said Draco. "Go on, tell them. Don't leave out anything."

Harry looked a little dumbfounded, but nodded, once, slowly. Then Draco turned around and walked away, not really looking where he was going, found the opposite wall and leaned back against it. He slid down it slowly, by degrees, until he was sitting on the floor with his hands locked over his knees, having put the sword down beside him. He couldn't hear what Harry was saying to the others but could watch and imagine. He saw them all staring at Harry as he spoke, riveted and shocked. At a certain point, Sirius paled, Ron swore, and Hermione gave a little scream and clapped her hands over her mouth. Draco heard Ron say loudly, "But that's *impossible!*" and saw Harry shrug, then Hermione went to put her arms around Harry and Draco lowered his head down on his knees and swam for a while in the peaceful blackness behind his eyelids.

He vaguely wished Ginny were around. There was something exhausting about Harry, Ron and Hermione when they were all together. The automatic wordless communication between them was

almost as swift as the telepathy he shared with Harry, and he was so used to seeing it arrayed and deployed against him that he felt automatically defensive and weary when he faced it. Sirius being there didn't help either. Normally it would have, but not after what Draco had done.

"Draco."

Sirius' voice. Draco raised his head. Sirius was kneeling in front of him, his dark eyes very somber. Behind him, Draco could see Harry, Hermione and Ron, still clustered in a small group, as they so often were at school, heads bent together: red, brown, and black. He said, "What?"

"Are you all right?"

He stared. "Shouldn't you be asking if Harry's all right?"

"Harry's obviously fine. You, however, have looked better."

In a small voice, "I figured you'd be hacked off at me."

"Hacked off?" Sirius sat back on his heels. His eyes were on a level with Draco's. "It strikes me that you've had to make a lot of difficult choices these past few days. Choices nobody should have to make, especially not a boy who's barely grown. I have to ask myself if I would have done what you've done, if I had been faced with these decisions when I was your age."

"And?"

"And I think I would have. I hope I would have. You've done better than anyone could have expected or asked of you. I'm proud of you."

Draco stared at Sirius for a moment. No one had ever said that to him before. Not once, not ever. "I didn't have a choice," he said.

"There's always a choice," said Sirius. "When we say there's no choice, we're just comforting ourselves about the decision we've

already made." His voice was, for a moment, bitter. "Even under threat or torture there is always a choice. And you've made the right ones. Draco..." He rested his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Being a good person...it doesn't mean adhering to some random set of rules you've imagined, or imposed on yourself. It means doing each right thing because it is the right thing; because it protects the people you care about. If there's one thing I've learned in my life it's not to be afraid of the responsibility that comes with caring for other people. What we do for love: those things endure." And his eyes darkened. "Even if the people you did them for don't."

Sympathy tore out of Draco what anger or condemnation would not have. His throat tightened, and he burst out, "I told Harry about his parents - that was wrong of me-- "

Sirius silenced him with a gesture. "I know you'd rather cut your own hand off than hurt him. You did the wrong thing but for the right reasons. Maybe you saved his life. *I* did the wrong thing; I should have told him myself, before."

"So you forgive me?" said Draco, raising his chin up and looking squarely at Sirius. For reasons he couldn't place, Sirius' forgiveness for hurting Harry meant nearly as much to him as Harry's had.

"I would forgive you if my forgiveness were required in this instance," said Sirius. "But it is not."

Draco looked at him. The backs of his eyes felt hot, and his throat felt too tight. He remembered Sirius hugging him earlier, in Slytherin's library, and how odd that had been; the only people in his life who had ever embraced him out of sympathy had been Sirius and Hermione, and neither time had he really known how to respond. In the silence, while he tried to figure out how to react, Draco heard Ron again, speaking clearly.

"*Manticore* blood? That's the weirdest thing I've ever heard."

"It's not that weird." Hermione's voice. "I remember that manticore blood and skin has have healing properties from *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*."

"Yeah, well, not everyone memorizes their textbooks," said Ron.

"Yes, some of us just scribble on them," said Hermione, and the haughty disdain in her voice was so evident that Draco looked up and actually felt himself smile, and Sirius smiled back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben, Ginny had decided, was a lovely, angelic sort of person and it really was too bad that he was so old, and also, not from her time. Draco could learn a lot from him. Ben was endlessly solicitous about her welfare, making sure she had enough to eat, enough to drink, and wasn't bored, while he hurried about the camp, packing and making various preparations. He even brought her extra clothing when he realized that the army they would be travelling back in time to intercept had vanished in the middle of winter. "I've only got men's clothing," he said apologetically, handing her a bundle of garments. "I'm sorry."

Ginny took the clothes gingerly, and snorted. "Leather trousers?" she demanded.

"They're breeches," said Ben. "They might be a bit big on you, but...what's so funny?"

"Nothing," Ginny spluttered, and shooed him out of the tent so she could change.

She had just stripped down to her undergarments when there was a soft \*pop\* and a very angry-looking someone Apparated into the tent.

Ginny screamed, leaped backward, and succeeded in wrapping one of the heavy canopies that draped the bed around herself as a covering. Then she screamed again, this time for help. "Benjamin! *Ben!*"



The intruder young man glared at her as if she, not he, was the intruder in Ben's bedroom. He was a young man, around Ben's age. "Who the hell are you?" he said rudely, looking not at all pleased to encounter a half-dressed teenage girl where he had presumably expected to encounter Ben. Ginny was about to reply equally impolitely when the tent flap opened and Ben raced in. He came up short when he saw the intruder, the look of alarm on his face fading into one of surprised resignation.

"Gareth," he said. "What are you doing here?"

Ginny looked at the intruder with renewed interest. So this was Ben's cousin, the Heir of Slytherin. Salazar's son. She should've guessed. He was tall, Ben's height, but as fair as Ben was dark, and looked several years younger. He had thick light hair that fell in his eyes, skin as fair as Draco's or Narcissa's, eyes as green as Harry's. His arrogant, handsome face was now twisted with fury. He certainly didn't look nearly as much like Draco as Ben looked like Harry, but did look like someone who could have been a distant cousin or relative. Especially when he scowled as he was doing now.

"Ben," he said furiously, waving a hand towards the Heir of Gryffindor. Ginny saw that in his hand, he clutched a piece of half-crumpled parchment. Around his wrist was a thick band of what looked like red glass. It glinted in the light. "What the *hell* is this?"

Ben edged behind Ginny, looking martyred. "Gareth, you didn't have to Apparate all this way -"

"I bloody well did!"

"Ginny, this is my cousin Gareth," Ben added, half as an afterthought, pushing Ginny towards Gareth, who scowled at her mightily. "Gareth, this is Ginny."

"Congratulations," he snarled at her.

"I'm the Heir of Hufflepuff," she told him, by way of introduction, still hugging the bed canopy around herself.

"Yes, I would have guessed that. You´re just as red and speckled as all the rest of them. Now skive off, will you? I need to talk to Ben."

"Red?" Ginny sputtered indignantly. "*Speckled?*"

Ben stepped between Gareth and Ginny, whether to protect Ginny from the angry Heir of Slytherin or the other way around, it was difficult to tell. "Gareth, don´t be an ass," he said.

Two bright red dots of rage appeared on Gareth´s cheekbones. "Oh, I´m the one behaving like an ass? What´s this, then? What kind of letter is this?" He glared down at the parchment, unrolled it, and started reading out loud. "*And so I will be going into the future to fight a battle unlike any we´ve fought before. If I die there and do not return, I trust you will take my son and raise him as if he were your own, and as a brother to your own children -*"

Ginny goggled at Ben. "You have *children*?"

"Just the one," said Ben absently.

"Gah," said Ginny, nearly speechless.

"Aside from the fact that you sound like a puffed-up poncy git in this brilliant epistle of yours, it looks like you´re planning to get yourself killed?," snapped Gareth, still glaring at his cousin. "You moron."

"I am not a moron."

"I beg to differ."

"All right, that´s it," said Ben, grabbed Gareth by the back of his cloak, and commenced dragging him into the tent. He glanced back over his shoulder at Ginny, and called "Just give us a minute, will you?" before they vanished, and the tent flap closed behind them.

Quite unrepentantly, Ginny raced up and put her ear to the flap. She could only make out muffled words of the conversation that was taking place inside - "sodding git", "get yourself killed why don´t

you", "always me having to look out for you," and "not going to do anything just because *you* say so."

Ginny sighed to herself. If they really were anything like Draco and Harry, this could go on for hours without ever getting to any good bits. She reached forward and pulled the tent flap back, and stuck her head inside.

Ben and Gareth were standing about five feet from each other, both yelling. Ben was scarlet in the face; Gareth, a bit like Draco, evinced his anger only by looking colder than ever. He was looking so cold, in fact, that Ginny wouldn't have been surprised if the arm he was pointing stiffly at Ben had broken off at the elbow and shattered on the ground like an icicle. He swung around and glared at Ginny.

"*What do you want?*"

"And hello to you too," she replied. "Look, don't you think it's Ben's decision what he wants to do? I appreciate that he's your cousin -"

"Second cousin," said both Gareth and Ben, in unison.

"Whatever. The point is, it's his business. And I think it's very brave of him. Nobody else in my time knows what he knows, is as equipped to fight this battle as he is. He could be the instrument that destroys the Snake Lord once and for all, which would be a wonderful thing--" she broke off, realizing with a sudden jolt that she was talking about Gareth's father.

"This has nothing to do with him being *my father*," said Gareth, spitting the words out as if they were poison bullets. "I *loathe* him. In the morning when I wake, I curse his memory. If the recollection of him could be wiped from the face of the wizarding world, if it would only please me."

Ginny gaped at him. "Then what? I don't understand."

"You can't win against him," said Gareth simply. "He's too powerful. It took the power of the houses of Ravenclaw, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff combined to bring him down, and even then he

couldn't be killed. What can you do? You're only children. He'll destroy you all, massacre your armies where they stand, and carve flutes for veela children out of your bleached bones."

"Gareth," said Ben, with a certain warning exasperation.

"We have something they didn't have," said Ginny, confidently.

"What?"

"The Heir of Slytherin on our side."

Gareth looked at her narrowly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Ginny, with a certainty she didn't feel.

Gareth glanced at Ben, his eyes wide and inquiring. Ben looked exasperated. "I was trying to tell you, Gareth. The prophecy, do you understand now? I have to go."

"The *prophecy*," said Gareth, sounding disgusted. "It's just a prophecy, just a bunch of words. It's not like it came from on high."

"Actually, it did," Ben pointed out gently. "That's what a prophecy is."

The Heir of Slytherin, now looking slightly deflated, looked back at Ginny. "He could still get killed," he said, indicating Ben with a wave of his hand.

"I'll be there to protect him," said Ginny staunchly, and she saw Ben grin behind his hand.

"You," said Gareth with disdain, "are a girl."

Ginny felt her ears turn red. She was about to take Gareth to task for his medieval outlook, when she realized that while his outlook certainly was medieval, there was a good reason for it. In fact, as far as history was concerned, medieval, for Gareth, would be progressive.

"She's an Heir," said Ben, briefly.

Gareth looked mutinous. "Then I want to go with you."

"You can't. You haven't got an heir," pointed out Ben, looking weary. "If you died, that would be the end of the Slytherin line. And *that* would alter history."

"So I'm being left out because I haven't procreated?" Gareth snapped.

"Yes," said Ben, with finality.

"That doesn't seem fair."

"It's an imperfect world," said Ben. "Get used to it. Now are you going to be helpful, or not? We're dealing with a lot of unstable magic here, and frankly I think we shouldn't be wasting time. We've got to convince an army to follow us into an uncertain future to battle the most evil wizard who ever lived. And we haven't even had lunch yet."

Gareth smirked. "Well, since you don't want my help..."

Ben's dark eyes suddenly narrowed. "I didn't say we didn't want your help at *all*. As a matter of fact...can we borrow one of your dragons?"

Gareth looked indignant. "One of my *dragons*? You *know* how expensive dragons are!"

Ben looked mutinous. Ginny sighed to herself. It was a good thing, she thought, settling herself on the bed, that they had all the time that magic afforded them. It looked like they were going to need it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione was astonished to see how bad Draco looked. His hair hung over his eyes in lank silvery tangles, his eyes were dark with exhaustion, the shadows under them bruise-blue, and he looked as if he hadn't slept properly in weeks. She would have guessed he'd been the one mortally wounded, not Harry. Harry looked chipper and bright-eyed fresh by comparison, although that wasn't saying much.

She knelt down beside Sirius and reached out to touch Draco lightly on the shoulder. She wanted to do more, but was wary of being too demonstrative towards him around Harry, even now. "You all right?" she said.

He nodded, looked up at Harry and Ron with tired eyes, and said, "We should go. We haven't got much time to get to the Orb."

"Harry told us," she said. She bit her lip. "It really is too bad we don't have the Cloak any more -"

"My understanding is that you can't open the Orb without Ginny," said Sirius. "And she, it seems, can't be found."

"I've been thinking about that," said Hermione. "If the Lycanthe can't locate her, she's either outside the castle, or outside this time. I say we get the Orb, get out of the castle, and try a Locator charm. If she's gone back through time she probably did it to escape, and she hasn't properly learned to set the Turner yet. We were off by a few hours when we came back here from the past. She's probably experiencing the same thing again. She'll be back sometime, and the Locator charm will find her."

She spoke with more confidence than she felt. She was fairly sure Ginny *had* used the Turner in some capacity, and wasn't at all positive that this wouldn't end in disaster. But there was no point saying so. If they couldn't find Ginny in time, perhaps there would be some way to destroy the Orb. Magic had advanced a great deal since the original spell calling for all four Heirs had been cast. She said as much, and Draco looked at her, his eyes quizzical. "The demons said that we would need a force equal to the force contained in the Orb to destroy it," he said.

"What does that mean in layman's terms?" Ron asked nervously.

"I think it means that it's pretty damn unlikely we could muster up that kind of firepower," said Draco.

"I think it means that if Darth Vader loans us the Death Star we might have a chance," said Harry.

Hermione giggled; nobody else did. Draco looked at Harry like he'd grown a second head. "Still punchy, are we?"

Harry looked mildly abashed. "I'm sorry about before. I was..."

"An enormous pest," suggested Draco.

"Not myself, I was going to say."

"Who were you, then?" Draco demanded, getting to his feet with a slight wince. "Please inform me, so I can avoid him in future."

"I said I was sorry," said Harry, looking mildly irritated, but Hermione noticed that completely without thinking he had stepped forward and put a hand on Draco's arm, helping him to his feet. He did this as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do; only Ron's face mirrored some of the surprise Hermione was feeling, although none of the pleasure. *Please let them be friends again, she thought fervently. I know how much they both need it, so please let it happen.*

Harry let go of Draco's elbow, and winced grimaced slightly. "It's gone away, went away the second I touched this," he said, touching a hand to the scabbard at his waist. "I feel really stupid."

"Well," said Draco equably. "I know how you feel. As it turns out, it only takes four drinks to get me thoroughly pissed. I would have expected myself to have a much higher tolerance."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You got drunk?"

"One more drink and I would have been dancing around in my underwear."

"Thank you for *that* particular piece of mental torment," said Ron.

"Not a problem, Weasley."

"Boxers or briefs?" wondered Hermione innocently.

"*Hermione*," said Harry.

Draco grinned.

"I was just asking," she said.

"Boxers," said Ron absently.

They all looked at him. He looked back, surprised, then turned beet-red and looked imploringly at Harry. "That time back at the Manor - when you wrecked his bedroom and all his clothes flew around - remember?"

"Not at all," said Harry, looking fidgety.

"You wrecked my *bedroom*?" said Draco, looking at Harry in shock.

"It wanted redecorating," replied Harry airily.

"I do believe we´re wandering from the topic," said Sirius, quietly. "The topic of escape. All we have left of the pencils are these little nubs here, and I'm not even sure it will work in all this adamantine."

"What have we got to lose?" asked Hermione, plucking the pencil from Sirius' fingers and handing it to Ron. Draco and Harry exchanged a look and Hermione was sure from Harry's expression that he was defending Ron to Draco yet again. To stave off an argument, she left Ron to draw a simple door, and explained to Harry and Draco about the Zonko's pencils and the maps.

Sirius joined them as she was finishing, and said, "Harry, I want you



four to get out of the castle as soon as possible. I'll find Remus and we can get the Orb and bring it to you outside the castle walls.

"But I'm the only one who knows where the Orb is," Draco interrupted.

"And I have the Lycanthe, and that's the only thing that can lead us to Ginny," Hermione added.

"Well, I'm not letting you go off on your own again," Harry said to her.

"I wasn't on my own," she countered.

"You're never alone with Ron Weasley, but you might as well be for all the good he does," Draco said scathingly.

Ron said something that sounded a lot like "plucking faster", and made a move towards Draco. Harry grabbed the back of his shirt.

Sirius sighed. "So to bring us back to the issue of the moment, when we get out of here, where are we going to go?"

"Draco and Hermione and I should get the Orb," Harry suggested. "Sirius, will you take Ron and go find Lupin? Then, when Ginny gets back, we can deal with the opening issues."

"I want to stay with you guys," Ron protested, looking back over his shoulder. "While you lot of Heirs are opening that Orb, you need someone to watch your back, protect you from evil. Important stuff. Besides - I might not be an Heir, but I do have Hufflepuff blood."

Draco scoffed. Hermione nudged him with her elbow, to make him be quiet.

"All right, you lot go together," Sirius said. "With the Heir of Slytherin is probably the safest place to be, and I'll likely have an easier time sneaking around the castle on my own." He looked at Draco. "And when you have the Orb, guard it with your life."

"Certainly not," said Draco, with the ghost of a mocking smile. "I plan to guard it with my really big sword."

"All right, then," said Harry. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was sunset, and the sky was golden streaked with silver threads like the threads in a tapestry. Ginny sat by the fire that Ben had made that afternoon, shivering very slightly. It was autumn in the time they were in currently. In the distance, she could see many small campfires burning around an assortment of tents. Clouds like dark red roses scudded high across the amber sky. The air smelled of oncoming frost, and rather strongly of dragons. Actually, dragon, as in the one that Gareth had lent them earlier that day, or what she thought of as that day, even though it had actually been on a day over a decade later than the one she was now reaching the end of. . His name was Feroluce, he was a Common Welsh Green, and he smelled distressingly of sheep, even when he was tethered many yards away as he was now.

She squinted slightly, and saw a figure coming towards her from the camp. She hoped it was Ben. He had been gone most of the day, talking to the army, and here they had come across an obstacle she hadn't been expecting: she couldn't talk to the soldiers, and they couldn't talk to her. It appeared that her ability to communicate in the past was limited to speaking with Heirs, since both Ben and Gareth had understood her perfectly, and when they spoke, she had heard perfectly sensible English. But when she tried to converse with anyone else, she heard a gabble with an occasionally understandable English word salted in. She had eventually given up in high dudgeon, and, she was sure, to Ben's amusement. She had gone to wait for Ben and read Helga's book on Time-Turners, while Ben used all his charm and his Heir of Gryffindor status to try to convince the army of his objective, and to assure them that if they *didn't* come to the future, they were sure to be vaporized by Slytherin anyway.

"It's destiny," he told them, looking very serious and important in his full Gryffindor regalia: red cloak lined in gold, scarlet tunic sewed with the emblem of a dragon, and, of course, the sword and the in a scabbard that was woven all over with flowers and leaves. Ginny thought it was rather cute. She wondered if this was what Harry would look like when he grew up. Then she remembered why she'd had such a terrific crush on him in the first place.

The figure coming towards her resolved its shape as it neared. It was Ben. He waved, looking exhausted, and collapsed by the other side of the fire. "Success," he announced. Then he made a face. "That dragon smells," he observed gloomily.

"Don't I know it," agreed Ginny.

"Have you been here all this time?"

"I haven't had much else to do. And I didn't think it was a good idea to mangle time by inventing Quidditch or something." Ben looked at her blankly. "After your time," she added, smiling.

"No, I think I know that word. It reminds me of your brother somehow." Ben shivered, probably from the cold, and moved closer to the fire.

Ginny suddenly realized that she didn't know anything about Ben's family. Professor Binns' class was all about battles and dates, and if he ever talked about the Founders, she must've slept through class. "Do you have any brothers, or does being the Heir mean you're the only guy, or in my case, girl, in your generation? Harry, Hermione and Draco - they're all only children, and I'm the only girl in my family. Is that how this Heir thing works?"

"Well, Helga has a few daughters, and the oldest is the Heir. There is only one child who carries Rowena's blood, and I do have a few half-brothers and a sister, but..."

"What about Gareth?"

"I don't even think he knows how many children Slytherin created.

The Snake Lord selected him as the Heir when he was about five, I think. Gareth doesn't talk about how it happened. We used to play together when we were children," he said. "I think he still feels a pretty heavy burden about his father being responsible for so much death. Even though it's not as if they really knew each other."

"I'm surprised you all let him live," said Ginny, and Ben turned a very surprised expression on her.

"Kill Gareth? I'll give you that he's annoying, but..."

"It's not that, it's just that he's the Heir of Slytherin, isn't he? Kill him, and you could end the line. Slytherin might never rise. I'm not telling you to do it, obviously," she added hastily, "since it would screw up history anyway, I'm just surprised that it never came up. In fact, why does the spell to open the Orb call for the presence of all four Heirs? Why the Heir of Slytherin? Isn't the prophecy that the ultimate Heir of Slytherin will be evil?"

"You ask a lot of questions," said Ben, his voice faint with tiredness. "Why is that?"

"I'm a girl with six older brothers. I've always had to ask a lot of questions, just to get one straight answer."

She heard Ben roll over onto his stomach and sigh. When she glanced over she saw him looking at her, resting his chin on his folded hands. "My father went to see Slytherin to ask him to give up the battle he was waging," he said, in a remote sort of tone.

"Slytherin invited him into his library, and when my father turned to shut the door, stabbed him through the back with his sword. There were servants there who witnessed some of what happened next. Slytherin bent over him where he lay on the ground, watching him die, but as my father died he left his curse - . The dying curse of one of Gryffindor blood is always potent. The curse was that as Salazar, his own cousin and once best friend, had murdered him, so he cursed Slytherin that he would one day be destroyed by his own blood and flesh." He sighed again, and put his hands over his face. His next words were muffled. "Rowena was mindful of that when she created the Orb spell. I think she also was being a little protective of

Gareth. He was only eight at the time, and she would have been looking for a way to make sure he was protected after his father was...removed."

"It seems so complicated, and like it hinges on so many tiny little things," said Ginny doubtfully. "How can you hang a whole spell, a whole prophecy, on the choices of someone who hasn't even been born?"

"If it seems complex that's because it is. And even making it simpler wouldn't make time and the flow of destiny any easier to manipulate. Helga told me once, 'Time bears destiny towards its inevitable realization. You can neither raise your hand to turn it aside, nor raise your sword to hold it back. Even the wisest man cannot know what tragic flaw may in the end prove essential to the whole.'"

"A tragic flaw?" Ginny let her head fall back as she gazed up at the sky, which had darkened to charcoal. She thought of Draco. If anyone was tragically flawed, he was. Oh boy, was he flawed. Well, not physically.

She grinned to herself in the dark, and rolled over onto her stomach. "Ben?" she said, and was about to ask him if they would be leaving right away or waiting until first thing in the morning, when she realized, from the light sound of him snoring, that he had already fallen asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione had been worried that they would run into guards on their way to the Orb; she had been worried that the resident monsters of the castle would delay them, or worse yet, they'd bump into Slytherin himself. The biggest obstacle to progress however, turned out to be the fact that Ron and Draco flatly refused to get along. Every few feet they would stop and snap at each other. Ron stepped on Draco's toe on purpose; Draco stuck out his foot and tripped Ron. And so on. Hermione glanced over at Harry as they

turned a corner, and he rolled his eyes. "I thought Draco was supposed to be walking ahead of us, making it look like we belong here?" she hissed at Harry, who sighed and whirled around.

"Okay, Draco get over - what are you two doing? Look, there's no need to put him in a headlock - ouch, that looks painful. Stop it."

Draco and Ron separated, glaring at each other. Hermione sighed. They were in a dark narrow corridor lined with suits of armor. The ceiling disappeared into darkness and cobwebs. Draco had been right; this part of the castle looked quite thoroughly disused. Their voices echoed softly off the stone walls.

"*What* are you arguing about?" Harry demanded, arms crossed over his chest.

"Weasley implied I wasn't to be trusted," said Draco blandly, looking at Harry. "Then he stood on my foot."

"You tripped me," snapped Ron.

"*After* you stood on my foot."

Ron changed tack. "Where the hell are you leading us anyway, Malfoy? Into a trap?"

Draco snorted in disgust. The two boys had paused in a shadowed doorway, snarling at each other. Hermione came to stand beside Harry, praying that they wouldn't be seen. "Yeah, that's right, Weasley, it's a trap," Draco snapped, the sarcasm in his voice so thick you could have cut it with a knife. "It's a trap and *you* figured it out. Because, you know, it's not like I haven't had plenty of opportunities to murder the lot of you, were I so inclined. It's not like Harry hasn't got the means to kill me hanging around his neck, if he wants to use it -"

Ron glanced over at Harry. "Use it," he said. "Please use it."

Draco looked at Harry and batted his eyelashes. "That's right, *Harry*," he said in a falsetto imitation of Ron's voice. "Why don't

you save me from the nasty man?"

Harry looked at Draco crossly. "You´re not helping things," he said, with an edge to his voice.

Draco shrugged. "Do I ever?"

"I wish I´d never saved your life," said Ron, abruptly. Then he looked startled, as if he couldn´t believe he´d said something quite so dreadful. Hermione gaped at him, although she could tell from his expression that he hadn´t meant it.

Draco was a different matter. He gave Ron the angelic smile that meant he was very annoyed indeed. "How charming, Weasley," he said. "You know, all this really reminds me of something I thought of yesterday while I was kissing your sister--"

Ron lunged at him, and was restrained by both Harry and Hermione, each of whom had efficiently grabbed an arm. They couldn´t stop him from shooting Draco a look of death, however. "Keep your hands off my sister," he snarled in fury.

Draco rolled his eyes. "´Keep your hands off my sister´? Who says that?"

"Both of you, stop it," snapped Hermione, holding on to Ron´s arm. "What we´re doing right now is more important than this - bickering."

"I´m not going anywhere without a guarantee that we can trust him," said Ron, pulling away from Harry and Hermione and jerking his chin at Draco.

"Sure, you can have a guarantee," Draco smiled. It wasn´t a nice smile. "The same guarantee I gave when I promised I´d never sneak into your bedroom at night and slit your throat."

"You never promised that," Ron pointed out.

"How right you are, Weasley. Sleep tight."

"All right, *enough*," announced Harry. He had drawn himself up to his full height and his green eyes were blazing. Bloody and scratched and bruised as he was, he retained the ability to draw a sort of dignity about himself like an adamantine cloak that nothing could penetrate. For a slight sixteen-year-old he had quite a commanding presence when he wanted to exert it. So did Draco, Hermione thought, but it was of a different sort. Draco was the sort of person who people would follow and obey out of a mixture of fear and respect for his innate brilliance and ruthless charisma. Harry, people would follow because they loved him. It was very hard not to love Harry, even when he was being his stern self, which he was now. Both Ron and Draco shifted uneasily under his gaze. Ron stared mutinously off in the distance, and Draco looked at the floor.

"You will both," said Harry coldly, "from this point onward, shut up and leave each other alone."

"But, Harry..." Ron protested, albeit weakly.

"I said shut up!" said Harry firmly, grabbed Draco by the arm, and hauled him protesting several feet away, where he turned and glared at him with such intensity that Hermione knew perfectly well that he was telling Draco off telepathically. Harry had never told her in so many words that they communicated that way, but it hadn't been hard to figure out, especially since she had heard them in the Weasleys' kitchen. Her hand strayed rather guiltily up to the Lycanthe at her throat, and as her fingers closed around it their voices leapt audibly into her consciousness as if she had tuned a radio to the Harry-and-Draco station.

*...no reason to act like that*, Harry was saying sternly. *You're not eleven years old any more.*

Draco looked sulky. *He started it.*

*You started it.*

*I did not.*



Anyway, Harry added, *Ron's got a point.*

*What?* Draco demanded, looking as if he were resisting the urge to take Harry's glasses off and whap him on the head with them. *Are you trying to say you don't trust me? Still?*

Harry looked surprised. *Of course not.*

Draco continued to glare at him with suspicion.

*Look, Draco, I told you I trusted you, and I do.*

Draco gave him an incredulous look, then sputtered with mirth.

Harry turned pink. *What is it?*

*You. Saying my name like that. Look, don't give yourself an aneurysm. It sounds funny when you say it, anyway. You can go ahead and call me Malfoy.*

Harry looked taken aback. *You called me Harry.*

*Only when I thought you were going to die,* said Draco, with complete frankness. He leaned back against the wall and half-lidded his gray eyes at Harry. *What do you mean, Weasley's got a point? I'd agree he's got lots of points, all of them bad, but somehow I don't think that's what you meant.*

*No. I was thinking of that.* Harry glanced at the Dark Mark on Draco's arm. *I trust your intentions, but there are some things you don't have control over. Slytherin does. That Mark links you to him. What if he suddenly decides to use it to control you?*

*So you're worried I might wind up hurting one of you?*

*Not so much as that you might get hurt. Sirius told me that the Dark Lord used to be able to control the Death Eaters from a distance with that Mark. If they resisted him, he could burn them alive.* Harry's green eyes were somber. *He could burn you.*

Draco shrugged, gaze steady. *Then let me burn.*

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again, and leaned his head back against the wall tiredly. *Is there anything I could say that would -*

*No.*

Harry sighed. *All right, then. Do what you like, Malfoy, you always do.*

"They´re doing it again," said Ron, suddenly, startling Hermione out of her eavesdropping reverie. "Standing there staring at each other. It´s weird."

"They´re talking," said Hermione serenely. She let go of the Lycanthe as she spoke. "That´s how they talk."

Ron looked at her suspiciously. "Can you hear them?"

She smiled. "Maybe," she said, a little distracted. Harry and Draco had finished their conversation and headed back towards them.

Ron was still irritable. "It gives me the creeps. Harry shouldn´t be hiding things from me that way."

"Ron, not everything is about *you*," Hermione said, walking forward and falling into step beside Harry. Draco dropped back, almost between them and Ron, and they moved further through the serpentine corridors. She squinted and tried to see to the end of the hallway, but Harry´s hand on her arm caused her to stop and turn and stare right at her own face.

It wasn´t a mirror, she knew that from the blue eyes that were gazing back at her from the wall. No, she had seen this face before, framed by hair that was like hers, yet somehow different, wearing a dark blue dress that was almost identical to the one she was in now, the one that Rowena Ravenclaw had dressed her in a thousand years before -- or the previous day. She heard Draco swear behind her, and realized that none of the others had seen this before. She herself had only seen it when she had been kidnapped, the day she

took the love potion, when it had been hanging in a round, tapestry-filled room. She wondered vaguely why Slytherin had moved it into this hallway, and felt Harry beside her reach his arm out, as if to touch his ancestor's face. Harry, who had so little experience with ancestors, was clearly transfixed by the face of Godric Gryffindor; she doubted he'd even seen the other founders' depictions. She took his other hand in hers, to offer a little comfort, as his fingertips brushed against the tapestry threads, and then...

She heard Ron say suddenly, and very sharply, "Don't touch that! It's a trap!" but it was too late; with a great rumbling and grinding noise, the floor seemed to open up under Hermione's feet. She heard Harry next to her shout in surprise; then the earth lurched again and she was tumbling down into darkness with Harry beside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sirius strode down the corridors exuding far more confidence than he felt. It seemed to be working, as well. Gray-robed minions hurried past him in great numbers, but not a one of them stopped to glance at him. It seemed to him, in fact, that they were all hurrying in the same direction with some sort of purpose, although he couldn't guess what that might be. Nothing good, he expected.

He had confidently claimed to Harry and the rest that he knew exactly where he was going. In truth, this was not the case. He thought he recognized the corridor he was in, with its many shadowed doorways, as the one he had been in with Lupin and the banshee woman, Raven. Yes, surely it was the right hallway. The flagstone floor seemed familiar, as did the curling-serpent torch brackets and the arched, almost oval wooden doors set in the wall at intervals. And there -surely that was the door Raven had shown Lupin through, carved of dark oak, brass-banded. He paused in front of it and then, before he had a chance to move, the handle of the door suddenly slid up, and it creaked open from the inside. Sirius backed up along the hallway, and stared.

Through the door came a trio of young women, clad in filmy white, two carrying lanterns shining with a soft pale light, the tallest playing a little harp that echoed a strange, sweet music. As they drew nearer, Sirius recognized them as veela. Up close, their resemblance to Narcissa unnerved him, as if he faced her was facing her, refracted through some sort of distorted mirror. Like her, they were all tall and pale and slender, with waterfalling silver-white hair and upturned blue-gray eyes. They paused, their silver robes swirling around their slender bodies, and giggled to each other.

*"Quel homme attirant. Que devrions-nous faire avec lui?"* smirked the first.

*"Je pense que nous devrions le manger,"* purred the second.

They advanced towards him en masse, smiling, and Sirius began backing away. He did not like the looks on their faces, nor the cruel, cold smiles on their red mouths, or the way the one on the left was hungrily licking her lips as she looked at him. He had absolutely no idea what they had just been saying, but was quite certain it wasn't good.

Suddenly another female voice cut into the scene, this one oddly familiar. "Shoo! Shoo! Get away from 'im! Leave 'im alone, you bunch of tarts!"

Sirius turned, and stared. Standing in front of him, barefoot and wearing a white nightgown, was Fleur Delacour. Her hands were jammed firmly on her hips and she looked furious. She had stretched one hand outstretched out imperiously, and to Sirius' surprise, the veela cowered back away from her.

Then he remembered. It was no wonder they were afraid of her. She was Slytherin's Source.

The tallest veela bared her teeth, and said in a wheedling voice. *"Fleur....pourquoi est-ce que tu ne nous laisses pas seuls et nous laisses avoir notre amusement?"*

*"Parce que je le dise!"* barked Fleur, imperiously tapping her foot.

"Because I say so! Now go!"

With a few parting hisses and some baring of teeth, the veela turned and vanished off down the corridor as if pursued by Furies. Fleur watched them go, looking a bit like a Fury herself. Her silver hair was crackling around her head like charmed tinsel, and Sirius was reminded that she was a Magid, and her anger was a powerful weapon indeed.

He took a step back, and her gaze flicked over to him. "Are you all right?" she asked, her tone melting into sympathy. "My cousins, they get...a little overexcited."

Sirius nodded, mind whirling.

Her eyebrows drew together. "I 'ave seen you before," she said. "I *know* you. You are a friend of Professor Lupin. I saw you in his office, you were in the fireplace."

Sirius nodded. "I´m Sirius Black."

"The professor...is he all right?" said Fleur, widening her dark blue eyes. "Is 'e 'ere?"

"He´ s 'ere...I mean here...he´ s with the other werewolves," said Sirius, not one to pass up an opportunity for extra information. He knew from Harry what Fleur had done, but also knew from Draco that there was more to the story. He tended to believe that she sincerely wished to make up for her mistake. Also, she seemed so weak she hardly posed a threat. "Can you lead me there?"

She nodded slowly. "I can. It is down this 'all, as a matter of fact. You were not far off." She looked up and down the corridor with weary trepidation. "If 'e catches me..."

"I´ll say that I threatened you," said Sirius, with more confidence than he felt. "They think I´m a big bad vampire, 'round here."

Fleur nodded slowly, as if she was too tired to ask more, and led the way down the hall. It turned out to be a short distance to the iron-

bound door he remembered; Fleur rapped upon it once, then pushed it open, letting Sirius walk in ahead of her. She came after him, shutting the door firmly behind her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Draco, with Ron right beside him, raced to the edge of the black hole in the flagstone floor into which Harry and Hermione had vanished, and peered down into it.

He saw a void of blackness narrowing down and down into nothing, with a faint glimmer of light at the end that might have been daylight, or might have been a reflection off water. "Harry!" he yelled, his voice bouncing off the sides of the hole. "*Hermione!*"

Ron added his voice to Draco's. "*Hermione! Harry!*"

A very faint, echoing shout answered them. Draco listened as hard as he could, but wasn't sure whether it was in fact an answer, or merely an echo of their own voices. He glanced sideways at Ron, who was as white as his shirt. "How did you know?" he hissed. "That it was a trap?"

Ron shook his head. "I just did," he said, his voice flat and dead.

Draco felt a sudden, sharp tingle in the scar on his palm. He glanced down at his hand just as Harry's voice spoke inside his head: *Hey, Malfoy. You up there?*

*Yeah.* Draco's shoulders sagged with relief. *Hermione and you both all right?*

*We're fine. Waist-deep in water, but fine. Ron...?*

*Didn't even lose a freckle.*

*Tell him we're okay.*

Draco glanced over at Ron, and nodded curtly, once. "They´re all right."

Ron looked at him narrowly. "How do you know?" Then he shook his head. "Never mind. I think I can guess."

*How did he know that it was a trap?* came Harry´s voice again, bemused and astonished. *Ron, I mean.*

Draco shrugged. *I don´t know. He says he just did.*

There was a short silence, then Harry spoke again. *Hermione says he´s a Diviner.*

"You´re a Diviner?" said Draco to Ron, incredulously. He knew from his father how very rare Diviners always had been, and how sought after their skills were. That Professor Trelawney, who had only a hint of Divining power, had managed to secure and maintain a professorial position at Hogwarts on the strength of her minor talent, bespoke how rare the gift was.

The redheaded boy looked defensive. "I guess so."

"Looks like you´ve got a trumpet to blow after all, Weasley," said Draco with a grudging amount of respect. "And you saved me from falling down that hole. Grabbed my arm. Rather a mysterious action on your part."

"I was reaching for Harry," said Ron, looking deeply disgusted. "I was reaching for Harry, and I got *you*. Now how are we going to get them out of there?"

"Ropes," said Draco, "we need ropes, or cords, or something -"

"Hermione said no magic, though," said Ron worriedly. "Not inside the castle."

"I know. Bugger." Draco cast about for an idea, and his eye fell on the heavy tapestries adorning the walls. "What about those," he said slowly, jabbing a finger towards them. "We could cut them up into

thin strips and tie them together. Make a rope that way."

Ron nodded, a little reluctantly. "Very practical. You sure you´re not a Muggle?"

"Very funny." Draco got to his feet. *Hang in there, Potter. We´re going to try to lower a rope down to you.*

*Okay.*

Draco grabbed the side of a tapestry depicting a herd of unicorns prancing in a summery meadow filled with brightly colored and clean scented flowers. It was terrifically incongruous amid the portraits and battle scenes that hung in the corridor, but nonetheless, he tugged at it; Ron joined him on the other side of the tapestry and tugged pulled there, too. A choking cloud of dust rose from the tapestry as they yanked at it, and Draco doubled over, coughing. When he straightened up again, he blinked the dust out of his eyes. Then froze, staring.

Advancing towards them from the far end of the hall were, three tall, slightly stooped, gray-swathed figures whose scabbed and rotting hands protruded from the sleeves of their robes. Before them rolled a wave of intense and glacial cold.

*Dementors*, he thought wildly.

And Harry heard him. *Get out of there*, he said. *Run.*

*But you -*

*RUN!* yelled Harry, with such force it nearly split Draco´s head open.

They ran.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Dementors." Harry swore. "They got chased away by dementors."



"We´re on our own, Hermione."

There was a long silence while Hermione absorbed this information. "So what have we fallen into exactly?" she said in a small voice, after what seemed like a great deal of time splashing around silently in the dark, but was probably less than a minute.

"Water," said Harry, and the sound of his voice was very comforting. "Just...ordinary water."

"It´s so *dark*," she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

She felt Harry´s hand bump against hers underwater, and he squeezed it tightly. "*Lumos*," she heard him say, and the space they were in was suddenly flooded with dim light.

"Harry! No magic!" she cried, trying to find a way to reverse his light spell. "Slytherin will know!"

"We´re not in the castle right now. And how could he come after us down here anyway?"

At this moment, with the water chilling her body, Hermione wondered if being discovered by Slytherin would be the worst thing for them. How long could they survive down here anyway? And where, exactly, was 'here´, she wondered, turning around. Hermione could just make out that they were floating in a sort of underground lake, with a rocky beach far to their left.

"We´d better swim towards that," Hermione said, hoping she sounded more optimistic than she felt.

There was a silence. Hermione was fairly sure they were both picturing some sort of lurking underwater monster ready to drag them down by their feet.

"All right," said Harry. "Let´s go."

They splash-paddled towards the rocky beach — they were both perfectly decent swimmers, but the water was very cold, and they

were already tired. With a sinking heart, Hermione began to wonder whether they would make it after all. It was made worse by the fact that they were dragging heavy objects with them, like the scabbard and the Lycanthe, but they couldn't just drop them to the bottom of the lake — they'd never be found again. On the other hand, if drowning was the only other option —

"H-Harry," she began, with chattering teeth.

He started to turn — and the water between them erupted. Hermione cried out as two shapes rose from the lake's surface, shedding water. She gasped — and then realized what they were. Mermaids. Three very pretty mermaids with long fairish green hair, gills, and green-blue fish tails shimmering underneath the water. They looked from Harry to Hermione and dissolved into a fit of giggles.

The leftmost one recovered first. "Hello!" she said cheerfully.

Hermione was reminded, rather bizarrely, of Parvati and Lavender, had they been part-haddock, although the speaking one bore a strange resemblance to Pansy Parkinson.

"Who are you?" Harry asked, sounding more amazed than anything else. "And how can we understand you?"

"We're merveela," said the one on the right, looking affronted, "so of course we speak English. Not that it matters, since we're going to drown you anyway."

Harry blinked at them, and then at Hermione. She shifted nervously in the water. Up close she could see that the merveela had rather sharp teeth and long greenish nails. "I'd really rather you didn't," Harry said.

"Oh, dear, I'm afraid we must," said the merveela. "Terrible nuisance of course -- especially from your perspective -- but we were set here to guard the castle, and guard it we must. We're not meant to let anyone past, unless it's the Heir of Gryffindor, but it's not like *he's* coming."

"But I *am* the Heir of Gryffindor," Harry protested, spitting water.

The merveela looked unconvinced. "Everyone says that, but nobody ever is."

"He really is," Hermione said. "Show them the scabbard, Harry."

Holding onto the rock behind him with one hand, Harry fumbled the sword out of its scabbard and held it up in front of him.

The merveela both gaped. The left one seized the other and shook her with excitement. "He´ s the one! The one from the prophecy, about the Heir! We can tell him the Secret!"

"Wait, what about *her*?´ the second demanded, looking doubtfully at Hermione.

"She´ s nobody."

"I am *not* nobody," Hermione snapped. "I´ m the Heir of Ravenclaw."

"Well, the prophecy doesn´ t mention you," said the first mermaid in a superior tone.

"Sexist piece of claptrap," said Hermione firmly.

"Any secrets that can be told to me," said Harry loudly, "can be told to Hermione."

The mermaids raised their delicate green eyebrows. "Well, all right," said the first. "I´ ll be right back," and she dived. She returned a moment later with a circular glass orb in her hand, and offered it to Harry. "This is for you," she said.

"What´ s that?" he asked dubiously.

"Not sure exactly," said the mermaid cheerfully. "I do know that it´ s very powerful, and that it´ s very old. It´s what we´ re supposed to guard. It came from the body of a wizard that was thrown down

here hundreds of years ago. It's meant to be given to the Heir of Gryffindor." She held it up to Harry.

Harry shook his head. "I can't take it," he said.

The merveela looked vexed. "Why not?"

"Because I'm about to drown," he said.

"Oh." The merveela had the grace to blush. "All right, we'll tow you to the beach," and that is exactly what they did. Harry and Hermione soon found that the water had become shallow, shallow enough to walk in, and they blundered after the merveelas through the water, feeling cold and miserable, but no longer in danger of drowning.

Finally they came to the rocky beach. Above the beach a set of stone stairs led up into darkness. Harry and Hermione dripped miserably while the merveela located her orb, and held it out to Harry again. He took it, and to the merveelas' great annoyance, handed it immediately to Hermione, who examined it curiously. It looked dark from the outside, but an animated little flame still danced inside it. Actually, when she looked more closely, she could see that it was three small separate flames, flickering apart and then together. A band of silver ran around the middle of the Orb, and it was chased with a barely-legible inscription in Latin. Hermione could make out only one word: *Adunatio*.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, his hair tickling her cheek as he leaned over her shoulder.

"It means a unity, or joining," said Hermione, handing the little globe back to him. "It could be a love amulet, or ..."

"Be careful with it," the right merveela interrupted severely. "It's dangerous. Don't break it. It's not to be broken. Terrible things might happen."

"Maybe we don't want it, then," said Harry.

The merveelas looked indignant. "Hrrmph," the leftmost one said, and pointed at the stairs. "Those will take you back to the castle," she said, sniffing haughtily. "And good luck to you both - you´ll need it."

With that, she disappeared beneath the water, swiftly followed by her companion. With a disquieted glance back, Hermione took Harry´s hand, and together they ascended the stairs, which vanished upward into darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, but about how many of you are there?" Lupin asked, reaching absently for a Hippogriff Crunchie, then shuddering and putting it down. "I mean, how many in the Snake Lord´s army *in total*? It would really help with strategy planning to have an idea of the numbers."

"Well," the chief of the werewolves (whose name had turned out to be Peter Whitstone, and who in his normal life was an accountant who currently lived in Ipswich and who had been bitten by a werewolf when he was sixteen) replied, munching a jellybean, "there´s us werewolves, and then there´s about two hundred dementors, the veelas, maybe a hundred trolls, a few banshees, the Gentlemen, some Oggrings and some Skolks."

"Oggrings?" Lupin was astonished. "Skolks? But they don´t exist! They´re mythical!"

Peter looked at him in surprise. "They are not."

The DADA teacher in Lupin was extremely interested. The resistance fighter in him was mildly horrified. "Oggrings are shape-changers," he said, thoughtfully. "I haven´t heard of a Skolk since..."

"They´re living skeletons," said a pretty female werewolf on his right who had introduced herself earlier as Isabel. "They´re very hard to kill."

Most of the werewolves had taken a passing interest in Lupin after his arrival and semi-adoption by Pete, and had come up to say hello and snag a jellybean. Isabel was the only one besides Pete who had stayed. The others were now engaged in an involved game of hackeysack in the corner. Lupin couldn't believe how harmless they all seemed. *So this is the vicious pack of beasts I've stayed away from all my life. I am deeply ashamed.*

"There's no such thing," snapped Lupin.

"You seem tense, my friend. I think it's time," Pete announced, "for a little relaxation."

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "Relaxation? All we do is relax."

But Pete and Isabel were not to be dissuaded. The pretty werewolf girl clapped her hands. "Fetch pipes, fetch drums, fetch musical instruments made from the shoulder blades of a pig and the stomach-lining of a water-vole, we're going to get down to some really bad sounds!"

The other werewolves scurried to do her bidding. Lupin, who was familiar with werewolf rock from the *Time-Warlock* series Sirius had ordered for his last birthday, and knew it involved a lot of howling noises, and so moaned and held his head. "Look, we have work to do, we have -"

The door opened then, and Sirius came through it, followed by a very pale, very thin Fleur Delacour in a long white dress. Lupin was so shocked that for a moment he barely reacted. Then he saw Pete get to his feet, reaching for the wand he had tossed at Lupin when he first came in, and he reached out and caught it out of Pete's hand. "Let me," he said roughly, and walked quickly over to where Sirius and Fleur were standing. Blocking the pair of them from the view of the rest of the room, he muttered "Fleur, catch this," and tossed the wand towards them. Fleur caught it out of the air, and Lupin stepped back. "They pass," he called over his shoulder, and saw Pete, who hadn't really been paying attention, nod and wave.

Lupin turned back to Sirius, reached out, and clasped his hand hard. "You´re all right? And Harry?"

Sirius filled him in quickly on the events of the day, while Lupin stared in amazement. He looked over briefly at Fleur when her part in events was mentioned, but she was staring firmly away, her eyes filled with tears. He decided not to ask her anything.

"So we´re going to meet them outside," said Sirius finally. "I just came back to fetch you. Although it looks like you´re doing all right for yourself. And I think that werewolf over there fancies you."

Lupin was taken aback. "What? Pete?"

Sirius grinned. "No, the pretty one in the blue."

Lupin rolled his eyes. "And even in the midst of a truly bleak situation, you´re trying to find me a date. Touching, it is."

Sirius grinned again; Fleur scowled. Then she said, "It might not be so easy as you think."

"To get Lupin a date?" said Sirius. "Being a bit hard on the poor man, aren´t you? He´s not *that* unappealing."

"No, to get out of the *castle*," said Fleur, flushing a little across the tops of her ivory-pale cheekbones. "There are very few exits and those are heavily guarded. What we need is a map."

"We?" said Sirius lightly, trying not to give the word too much emphasis.

Fleur looked down. "I would like to come with you, if you would have me."

"Of course you can; we can use your assistance in getting out of the castle," said Lupin, touched by how unhappy she seemed. There was also a slight gnawing anxiety at his heart when he remembered talking to her about her desire to get her hands on a source of power. Perhaps if he´d been a bit more helpful, she wouldn´t have

taken it quite so far. But that line of thought was profitless... "We have maps here," he added quickly, gesturing back towards the table where Pete and Isabel were standing, looking at some sort of chart.

"How do you know that the other werewolves won't turn on us?" Sirius hissed in a whisper as they made their way back towards the table. "Aren't they in thrall to the Dark Lord?"

"I put Will-Strengthening Potion in the Every Flavour Beans," said Lupin, under his breath. "They don't know it yet."

Sirius grinned. Lupin was visited with a sudden idea. He looked over quickly at his friend. "Have you still got those Zonko's Pencils, Sirius?"

"Only one." Sirius produced it from his pocket and handed it to Lupin. It was odd to have one of those pencils back in his grasp after twenty years. He remembered the feel of it, the sense that magic was flowing out of it as he traced it over the map of Hogwarts that Peter had torn out of a copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. The first Marauder's Map. Now he bent the soft nub of the pencil to the map of Slytherin's castle, although at Fleur's suggestion, he traced only the ground floor where the exits were. He felt the pencil spark with energy in his hand as he followed the lines that indicated corridors, doors, stairways and exits, and watched the tiny dots that testified to the location of the castle's occupants spring into existence and movement. It was only when he had traced the gardens and the walls that surrounded them that he noticed something strange.

"Sirius," he said, beckoning his friend over, "look at this."

Sirius looked over his shoulder, started, and swore. Lupin didn't blame him. Outside the walls of the castle were a veritable heaving mass of dots, indicating hundreds, perhaps a thousand, people gathered outside the walls. And if that wasn't odd enough, there were three dots gathered towards the front of the mass that bore the names *Virginia Weasley*, *Draco Malfoy*, and ... *Benjamin Gryffindor*.

"What the...?" Sirius muttered, but Fleur at that moment interrupted



him by quickly crossing the room, and yanking aside one of the heavy velvet draperies covering the windows. The werewolves yelped indignantly as bright silvery moonlight speared into the room, but Fleur ignored them, gesturing wildly for Lupin and Sirius to join her. They hurried across the room to the window, and Lupin held the heavy drapery aside as he peered out into the gardens.

And nearly fell over. Beyond the walls, he could see a heaving mass of figures milling about - dozens, hundreds - the moonlight gleaming off bright armor and silvery weapons and brightly-colored pennants that held their own light as they snapped in the breeze, each adorned with a dark red flag bearing a golden lion. *Gryffindor*.

"It's an army," Sirius whispered, amazed. "Ginny went back in time and got an army. How'd she do it? What an amazing girl."

Lupin shook his head. "They're just milling about, though. What are they waiting for? Why don't they attack?"

"They cannot get in," said Fleur positively. "There are wards up all around the castle that prevent an attacking force from entering. They will never be able to get in. The Snake Lord knows this; he is probably not even worried."

Lupin glanced at her. "Is there any way to take the wards down?"

Fleur nodded slowly. "Only Slytherin can take them down. Or..."

"Or what?" asked Sirius, turning to look at her. "Or you can?"

She shook her head, trembling all over. "I can try, but when I attempt to disobey an express order....you do not know the pain, it is blinding, scorching." She looked down at the ground. "I *wish* I could 'elp you. I 'ave much to atone for."

Sirius looked at Fleur's bent head, then over at Lupin, who was wearing a thoughtful expression. "Remus," he said slowly. "Have you got any more of those purple Every Flavour Beans?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Draco did what Harry had suggested, and ran. He was quite aware of Ron running behind him; the red-headed boy had very long legs and Draco was impressed with the speed with which he zipped down the corridors. Or would have been, if he'd had the breath and energy to be impressed with anything.

They raced around a corner and Draco darted sideways and towards a long staircase the color of polished bone. Then he felt Ron's hand grab at his sleeve. "Do you *know* where you're going?" the other boy panted.

"Sure I do," said Draco, and ran for the stairs. Ron followed. From the cold that billowed behind them, Draco could tell that the dementors were not far behind them. They clattered up the stairs, around a corner, another flight of stairs, and ran smack into a closed door.

Ron swore, with despairing resignation, and snarled, "I thought you said you knew where we were going!"

"Shut up a minute." Draco stared at the door, which was not quite like any door he'd seen before. It seemed to be made of dark ivory, and was bolted and barred on his side. He yanked at the bolts, but they were locked fast. It didn't help that his fingers were sweating and his hair was getting in his eyes. There was a freezing wind blowing through the corridor and he had a feeling he knew why.

"Use your sword, dimwit," said Ron, flopping back against the wall and glaring at him.

"What?"

"Use your sword! It can cut through anything. *Think!*"

Draco pulled the sword from the sheath hanging over his back. He looked at it, then at the very solid-looking door, then shrugged, and swung the blade at it hard.

As it had cut through Harry's adamantine chains, the blade drove through the door, slicing off great chunks as if it were cutting through butter. He drew it back, and swiped at the bolts with it. The sword sliced through them and they clattered at his feet. Ron grabbed for the door handle and wrenched at it; the door swung wide, and they dashed through it. Draco tried to slam it behind them, but it was too destroyed to hang properly and just dangled from its hinges.

"Leave it," barked Ron, and Draco turned to see where they had ended up.

They were standing on a wide stone balcony that seemed to run in a circle around a tall bone-colored tower. The balcony was walled, although the walls reached no more than chest-high, and were topped with crenellated battlements. Draco raced to the edge of the balcony and looked down. Far below and all around, he could see the tops of the forest trees, stretching away towards the horizon. High above, stars and a half moon gazed back at him, and washed the sheer sides of the tower with a cool milky light. Draco looked around and realized that he hadn't been outside in days.

There was no way to climb down that he could see, and no other exit than the one they had come through.

Ron didn't even swear this time. He was very pale in the moonlight, his freckles standing out like inkblots. "We're trapped." He looked at Draco. "Can you do anything? They took my wand."

It was an obvious effort for him to ask this, but Draco didn't say anything. He was thinking that it was all very well and bloody good to be a Magid, but not actually that much use in crisis times. All he could do was spells without a wand, and he couldn't think of any spells that would come in handy, even if he *had* had a wand. If only he'd learned how to Apparate. Experimentally, he held up a hand, casting his mind back to Charms class. "*Catedra*," he said.

There was a bright flash of light, and a large overstuffed sofa appeared a short way away from them, resting against the

battlements. It looked very comfortable, and had a matching paisley ottoman.

Ron looked at him in disgust. "Malfoy..."

Draco glared, and tried again. "*Cerrucha*," he intoned, and this time thin ropes burst from his fingers and tumbled in snakelike coils around his feet. He grabbed for one. "We can climb down -" he began, tossing one end of the rope to Ron.

Ron looked at it dubiously. "At least it isn't paisley."

"You're working my last nerve, Weasley," said Draco, turning to see if he could wedge the sword in between the crenellations of the balcony. If he could tie a rope to it, then perhaps they could -

"Malfoy," said Ron, in a strangled voice.

Draco turned and saw Ron staring off behind them with huge eyes. He spun around, feeling the blood drain from his heart.

The three dementors stood at the tower entrance, tall and remote and terrifying. The moonlight iced them with silver, throwing terrible elongated shadows over the flagstones, making them seem ten times taller than they were. They paused where they were, the blank black spaces under their hoods indicating nothing at all.

Then, slowly, they began to move forward, and a bright spear of cold shot through Draco, freezing his nerves, turning his blood to ice water. *No, not this, not now.*

He sensed that Ron beside him was not as affected as he was. Swearing, Ron bent down, grabbed the ottoman at his feet, and threw it at the advancing dementors. The tallest of them caught it neatly out of the air, crushed it on one huge, spatulated hand, and heaved it over the side of the balcony.

"I don't think he liked your ottoman, Malfoy," said Ron in a strangled voice.

Draco was beyond being able to think of anything clever to say in return. "Get out," he said instead, and shoved Ron away from him, hard. The red-headed boy stumbled, and looked at him in surprise. "They want me. Get out of here."

He had a vague sense of Ron looking at him in surprise, saying "Malfoy--" and then his words bubbled away like speech heard under water, as the dementors began to move forward, gliding instead of walking, and driving before them the *cold*. Cold so intense it sliced into his flesh like knives, as it had in the forest, and as in the forest the cold brought with it the agonizing weight of memories not his own, a rising tide of screams and shrill pleas that stoppered his ears and blinded his eyes. The memories of blood washing over his hands drove into his brain. And this time there was no Harry to drive them away.

He hit the wall with his back, hard, the uneven rocks driving into his shoulder. For a moment, the pain cleared his vision. Feet away, the dementors were moving towards him. He could see Ron standing by the tower entrance, staring over towards him. Everything seemed to be happening both very quickly and very slowly, and he realized suddenly that he had left his sword there on the balcony, he could see the moonlight gleaming off its silvery hilt, just behind where Ron was standing. He reached out a hand, willing the sword to leap into his grasp as it once had.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, not even sure *how* to try, it had always been so effortless before. He reached out his hand, extending his fingers, and *willed* the sword to come to him.

Nothing happened. He heard his own despairing exclamation ring in his ears, and then even that was driven away by the freezing mist that was rapidly dropping down over his vision. He could try a Patronus spell, he thought, but then he'd never tried that before around a *real* dementor, never contended with the glacial force of them that seemed to suck all the will and energy and hope and -

Ron's voice cut through the mist. He was shouting something,

hoarsely. Draco's name. Draco looked up slowly, and saw Ron running toward the balcony. He seized the sword from where it lay, and spun around with it in his hand. His face contorted with pain, he swung his arm back, and threw the sword hard through the air. There was a brilliant flash of light, and by its illumination Draco saw the sword winging towards him, slicing the air; he reached up, and caught it by the hilt. He swung it down and forward, weight and intent behind it as his father had taught him, and drove it hard into the body of the dementor standing in front of him, just where its heart would have been if it had had one.

There was another flash of light, this one even more brilliant and greenish in hue. Draco staggered back, half blinded, as the dementor screamed. And screamed. It was the first time he had ever heard one of these notoriously silent creatures make any sound. And what a sound: a long soulless breaking scream of pain and rage. Clutching at the hilt of the sword buried in its body, the dementor staggered backwards and toppled to the ground, writhing, as Draco stared in fascinated horror.

Immediately the other two dementors turned around. They made no sound, but began rapidly moving towards him, and he saw as they moved a still figure lying on the ground behind them.

Ron.

He darted forward to seize at the sword buried in the body of the dead dementor, but the dementors creatures were too quick. They swerved in front of the corpse of their companion, cutting off his access, and as they glided towards him, silent and terrible as an oncoming wave. He took a step back, and another step, and fetched up against the wall again with his breath coming hard in his ears and his hands shaking. He turned around and hopped up on top of the wall. He was looking down at the advancing dementors now, and below him the wall dropped sheer as a cliff to the treetops below. The stars and the moon beat down with a blinding silver light, and all time seemed to slow down to this one sliver of a second, pinned between the earth and the sky.

He closed his eyes, and thought desperately back to the short

Patronus lesson Harry had given him in the forest. *A happy memory.* He hadn't had one then, and buggered if he had one now, he thought bitterly. He heard Harry's voice in his head. *Then make something up, Malfoy.* He tried to force his mind around the dream he'd created for himself back in the forest, but the faces he tried to conjure up - Harry's, Hermione's, Sirius' - seemed to take a long time to form and solidify and the cold was getting more and more intense. He held out his hand. *Expecto Patronum*, he whispered, and then, louder, *"Expecto Patronum!"*

He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was wings. Huge green-gold wings that blotted out everything else. For a moment he thought his spell had worked, and then he remembered that the Patronus he had conjured had been silver, and then the wings fanned backward and dropped, and he saw the entirety of the creature he was looking at.

And he almost fell off the wall.

A dragon was hovering in mid-air just at eye level in front of him, its wings beating with steady power. It was dark green in color, with whirling golden eyes, and wore trappings of green and silver. And on its back sat Ginny. He almost didn't recognize her, she looked so fierce and intent. The powerful wind from the dragon's wings blew her fiery hair behind her like a scarlet banner. In her left hand was a pair of golden reins, and she held them as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

She held out a hand. "Get on!" she called, the wind tearing the words from her mouth. *"Draco!"*

He jumped without hesitation, and, clasping her hand, scrambled up onto the dragon's back. He slid his arms around her, which would have been quite pleasant in some other situation, and shouted into her ear, *"Your brother! We have to go back for your brother!"*

Ginny half-spun around, her face white. *"I only saw you! Ron? Where is he?"*

In response, Draco reached around her and grabbed her hands

where they clutched the reins. He hoped fervently that riding a dragon was like riding a horse, which he did know how to do. He yanked the reins hard to the right, and the dragon, to his delight, responded by swerving into a steep, banking dive.

Ginny screamed but stayed bolt upright as they flew low over the tower, the dragon bellowing -- in rage or outrage, Draco couldn't tell -- as its wings scraped the crenellated battlements. He was leaning forward around Ginny now, staring down, scanning the flat top of the tower for Ron.

He found him, and he was no longer lying limp on the flagstones. He was standing, cradling his arm against his chest, and backing away slowly from the two advancing dementors. He looked up and gawped as the shadow of the dragon fell over him.

Ginny was staring down at her brother in horror. "*Ron!*" she screamed.

Draco flung himself sideways, and reached out his hand. "*Wingardium leviosa!*" he cried, and Ron's feet left the ground. Draco wasn't any better at the spell than he had been when he'd used it on Hermione back at the manor mansion - Ron shot into the air like an arrow from a bow, and Draco nearly fell off the dragon as he caught the back of Ron's jacket and hauled him bodily down from the air. He landed awkwardly on the dragon, in between Draco and Ginny, and gave a stifled yell of pain. The right sleeve of his shirt was soaked with blood.

As he landed, the dragon bellowed in protest at this new addition to its load, which gave Draco an idea. "*Ginny!*" he yelled. "*Can you make it breathe fire?*"

"*Yes!*" she shouted back, left hand white on the reins, her right hand behind her, clutching onto her brother. "*I think so!*"

"*Well, do it!*" he shouted, and Ginny, whipped the reins sideways, pulling the dragon into a sharp backwards turn so that they faced the tower, and then shouted something unintelligible into its ear.



It reared back, and Draco had to grab at Ron's jacket to keep him from sliding off. Flame burst from the dragon's mouth, the color of molten lava, a cascading jet of fire that seared across the roof of the tower in a destroying, purifying blast. It was soundless and fierce and almost instant. Like a wave, it crashed across the roof's surface, obscuring everything from view - and just as quickly vanished.

Draco stared, and in the deathly silence that followed the blast of fire a terrible stillness seemed to descend, like the aftermath of a shattering explosion. Slowly he became aware of the rhythmic beating of the dragon's wings, heard Ginny's sharp gasp, and Ron's ragged breathing. They were both staring below them, and no wonder. The roof of the tower was bare; burned clean by dragon fire. The ugly sofa was gone, the dementors were gone; it was as if the top of the tower had been swept bare clean by some cosmic event. All that remained was the sword, which glittered, unburned and unharmed, in the middle of the bare empty expanse of scorched flagstones.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What about Slytherin?" Sirius asked as they hurried after Fleur down a narrow, twisting darkened corridor. Long hallways led off in all directions, archway after archway disappearing into green-tinted mist. Creatures hurried by them - trolls brandishing heavy axes, banshees emitting low, sepulchral moans as they stalked by, veelas looking rapacious and clicking their beaks expectantly. Sirius now realized that the many Dark creatures he'd seen rushing by him earlier had been racing outside, Called to the battle. Only the werewolves, freed from the Call by the potion Lupin had administered on the sly, remained in their rooms, blissfully unaware of what was going on outside the castle. When he, Lupin and Fleur had left, they'd left off basket weaving and moved onto a fingerpainting session.

"Where is he?" muttered Lupin in Fleur's ear as they stalked purposefully down the corridor. Fleur led the way, a determined light in her eyes. "Where's Slytherin?"

"I do not know," she replied firmly. "Nobody does. He left instructions that he was not to be disturbed, and nobody would dare disobey him, even if they could."

"Did you get the sense that he's was concerned about the army attacking outside the walls?" Sirius demanded.

Fleur shook her head. "No. Whatever 'e is doing, 'e is not concerned about that."

"My guess is that he's about to make a last bid to reclaim his powers," Lupin said, as they turned a corner and came out into a large, circular room. "He knows perfectly well that at his full power, he could flatten such an army with a thought....what *is* that?"

Sirius stopped alongside his friend and stared. Instead of a roof, this room was open to the sky, except where it was crossed over by four metal chains joined together in the middle. And from the middle, a fifth chain of brass, each link as large as a cartwheel, dangled down into the room, connected by an S-shaped link to the centerpiece of the room: a huge serpent, as big as a house, made out of overlapping plates of copper and glass. It was coiled around and around a tall marble pole, topped with a carved marble skull with a serpent protruding from its mouth: a sculpted Dark Mark. Sirius could see through the transparent parts of the metal serpent's body to an intricate system of brass cogs and gears inside, turning in regular rhythm. Black steam puffed from its brazen nostrils, and fire flickered behind its huge empty eyes.

With a determined look, Fleur strode into the middle of the room, walking very quickly. As she moved towards it, the serpent began to slowly uncoil itself. Slowly its tail moved, extending outward towards her, sweeping across the floor. Fleur stepped over it, rucking up her sleeve as she went - Sirius saw her slender arm emerge from the white sleeve, the pale skin stained by the blister-black Mark just above the elbow - and then she raised her arm and pointed it at the serpent, her face contorted with intense concentration.

"*Delenda!*" she cried, and a bolt of green light shot from the Dark Mark on her arm, arrowed straight towards the mechanical snake, and disappeared down its throat.

As Sirius stared, transfixed by amazement, the green light from Fleur's Dark Mark vanished, and she collapsed silently to the floor in a crumpled heap. He looked sideways at Lupin, but his friend had already dashed forward, leaping over the serpent's coiled tail in his hurry to get to Fleur. The serpent made no move to stop him as he lifted the unconscious girl in his arms; indeed it seemed frozen in place. Sirius might even have said that it was wearing a surprised expression. Suddenly, its head drooped, and there was a thud inside it, as if something had exploded. A good deal of white smoke poured out of its joints, and bright flashes went off behind its eyes. With a tearing noise, it collapsed in on itself, scattering bits of glass and copper across the floor like bright confetti.

Fleur's eyes were open now, and when Lupin reached the door and Sirius, she said in a firm little voice, "Put me down now, please." Sirius helped Lupin set her on her feet (and could have sworn she was blushing slightly); standing, she stared past them, transfixed, at the destroyed machinery of the dragon. Then, in a hushed small voice, she said, "Listen."

They listened. Sirius imagined that Lupin, with his extra-sensitive hearing, probably picked up on the noise before he did, but eventually

"The wards are gone," said Fleur. "The walls 'ave fallen down, and the castle is open to attack."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can I see him? Just for a minute?" Ginny begged.

Ben nodded. "If you like, but he's not awake; the mediwitch gave him a Red Verberna Potion for the pain. He won't be waking up any time soon. Your brother is out of this war, for the time being,

anyway." Ben touched her shoulder lightly. "Go on; I'll be waiting here."

Ginny nodded and pushed the tent flap aside, and went in. Inside was a clean, well-lighted little room with white walls, a dark wooden floor, and in the center of the room, a bed. And on the bed lay Ron.

She walked over to the bedside and stood looking down at her brother for a moment. He lay on his back, his left hand heavily bandaged and stretched out beside him. She bit her lip. The moment they had landed the dragon in the clearing in front of the army camp, Ron had slid from its back, landed on the ground, and promptly fainted from the pain in his arm. Ginny had gasped when she'd seen the extent of his injury, and started screaming for Ben.

If she'd ever wondered what happened to an ordinary person who touched a Living Blade, now she knew. It was as if her brother had clasped his hand around a live coal: his palm and wrist were marked with a livid, bleeding burn in the shape of the sword hilt, and the imprint of the carved metal serpents had burned themselves into his skin, almost down to the bone. He had been shaking with pain and reaction until the mediwitch had given him some relaxation juice. Now he lay quiet, flushed with sleep and fever, his red hair pasted to his forehead in sweaty locks.

Ginny leaned over and quickly kissed him on the temple, just where the silvery mark Rowena had left there was still shining. Then she straightened up and went out of the tent.

Her eyes were blurred with tears, and it was a few moments before she was able to focus on the fact that the person waiting for her outside the tent was not Ben, but Draco. He was leaning against one of the wooden tent supports, looking vaguely skittish, in that way that cats sometimes look, when they're quite uncomfortable where they are but still refuse to move. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt, and his light silver eyes stood out in clear contrast. A little shiver ran up her spine at the memory of sitting on the dragon in front of him, feeling his arms around her and the muscles in his chest hard against her spine, his hands over hers on the reins.

"Ron's all right," she said, and scrubbed hard at her eyes with the back of her hand. "If you were wondering."

"I *was* wondering." Draco's eyes were cool and remote. "I owe him now. Again."

"You saved his life, too," she said.

"He's still two for one," said Draco.

"Yeah, yeah, and no Malfoy can owe a Weasley anything, family honor, blah blah blah," said Ginny irritably. "Where's Ben? I want to talk to him."

Draco uncurled his arm and pointed a long, elegant, disdainful sort of finger in the direction of the next tent. "He went thataway," he said. "He said he'd be back soon."

"Soon? What does that mean, soon?"

Draco raised one eyebrow, which was something she'd always wished she could do. "Later than right now, earlier than never."

"Thank you. How helpful."

The wind had picked up and blew Draco's blond hair into his eyes; he pushed it away with an impatient hand. "I aim to please."

"Maybe you should aim a little lower, and try for being somewhat tolerable."

"Ouch," Draco straightened up, eyes sparking. "Aren't we cranky, Weasley. And after our touching interlude last night, I rather thought you had feelings for me."

"I do have feelings for you," said Ginny firmly. "Feelings of loathing and *great* irritation."

"So you decided to fill the gap with Mr. Poncy Git in the leather tights?"

"They´re breeches," corrected Ginny. "And Ben is not a poncy git, he´s the Heir of Gryffindor."

"*Harry* is the Heir of Gryffindor," snapped Draco. The cold wind had blown color into his cheeks. Either that, or he was more angry than he was letting on. "Do we need more than one? Do they come in six-packs?"

"These are Ben´s soldiers!" said Ginny heatedly, gesturing at the camp all around them. "I couldn´t have done any of this without him."

"Well, if I´d known that what you were looking for was a man with a really large..."

"No need to be nasty."

"...Contingent of armed forces, I was going to say." Draco grinned, a grin that turned suddenly considering. "Let me get this straight. You went back in time to retrieve Mr. Poncy Git and his army, and then you came back here?"

Ginny nodded.

"You could have spent months back in time with this guy. Getting acquainted. *Very* well acquainted. How do we know you didn´t?"

"You don´t." Ginny spoke serenely.

"And are you going to provide any further clarification on that?"

"Nope."

"And now you´re just *trying* to annoy me," Draco observed.

"Yes, I am," said Ginny. "And by the way, behold my success."

"I thought all you Weasleys were supposed to be nice people," said Draco, looking somewhat mournful.

Ginny suppressed another grin. "There's a lot about me you don't know," she said.

Draco gave her a long look. "Apparently," he said, and she got the feeling that he wasn't, after all, actually angry, and that he was playing with her as he often did. Usually, however, he won. This time, she had a feeling it was a draw. She felt his considering glance on her and realized that she was shivering in the cool night breeze.

"You're cold," he observed, and pulled off the black sweater he was wearing. The resultant static electricity haloed his silver hair around his head. He had another black shirt on underneath, the sleeve of which was torn. *Always black*, she thought. "Take it," he said.

"I'm really fine, Draco."

"Come on. You gave me your sweater once."

She blinked. It took her a moment before she remembered that she had given him her cardigan to dry his hair with back at the Manor the week before. A little grudgingly, she reached out and took the sweater. She was about to thank him when a voice spoke up from behind them. "According to Feroluce, he had a good time with you two." It was Ben, hands in pockets, looking vaguely amused. "You let him breathe fire."

Ginny felt herself blush. "Just the once."

Ben smiled. "It's all right." Ginny noticed something she had noticed seen before, which was that he seemed to be avoiding looking at Draco. When he had first seen him, kneeling over Ron, he'd done an astonished double-take, and nearly dropped the stretcher he had been holding at wandpoint. As for Draco, he'd barely reacted to Ben. He looked at him once, hard, and Ginny almost saw him thinking, *That's not Harry*. As far as she could tell, he had responded more to the Gryffindor regalia - cloak, sword, and scabbard - than to Ben's actual, physical resemblance to Harry. She had a feeling Draco had a sort of recognition of Harry that went beyond the way he looked to the way he *was*. He would probably

recognize Harry in the pitch dark.

She had already brought Ben up to date on what had happened at the top of the tower while they waited outside the mediwitch's tent; now he proceeded to fill them in on the army's efforts to get into Slytherin's castle. They walked as they talked, back through the tents towards the walls of the castle, where the army was grouped. They were a mass of huddled figures in the darkness, punctuated by bursts of wandlight. A discontented buzzing rose from them, as if from a hive of wasps.

"They don't seem happy," Draco observed dryly.

Ben shook his head. "It's no use," he said, looking frustrated. "There are wards up all around the castle that prevent this number of people from entering. We could try climbing over the walls one by one, but that's like asking to be picked off by Slytherin's army of Dark creatures. Have you ever seen veela when they get angry? I don't want to subject my men to that until I have to. If we're going to attack, we need to attack in numbers, we need to attack in force -"

"We need to attack in leather tights," added Draco.

"Would you like to borrow a pair?" Ben asked him, without missing a beat.

"Draco, shut *up*," said Ginny.

"Is there no magical way to take the wards down?" Draco asked.

"We've been trying, of course," said Ben. "I thought perhaps you might have some knowledge, being the Heir of Slytherin. And I see he marked you with the *signa serpens*."

Ben spoke lightly, but his eyes on Draco were hard and inquiring.

Draco looked down at the Dark Mark on his slender arm, revealed where his sleeve was rucked up, just under his elbow. "Yes," he said tightly.



"Doesn't that frighten you?" said Ben.

"I don't frighten easily."

"You want to fight," said Ben, sounding incredulous. "You want to use that Living Blade of yours to cut down the darkness? Knowing what you are?"

Ginny met Draco's eyes with her own. She could see the stars reflected in his eyes, a lighter silver against the dark silver irises. He looked intent, and hesitated a long moment before speaking.

"Maybe I don't know who the enemy is any longer," he said slowly.

"Maybe it's me. I don't know. But I do know who my friends are. I want to fight with them. If you let me fight, I'll fight on your side. If you don't let me fight -"

"Then what?"

"I'll fight on your side anyway." Draco jabbed a finger towards the castle, looming huge and black against the dark sky. "In there is everything that matters to me in my life. I want my life back."

Ginny felt a brief flash of unaccountable irritation, but suppressed it. She knew Draco was speaking figuratively, after all, his mother wasn't in the castle, and she certainly mattered to him. Still, it was true enough that he was quite unreasonable where both Harry and Hermione were concerned, and pretty much only where they were concerned. She had been, in fact, surprised at his fierce adamancy about returning to get Ron - and had then felt guilty for it. What kind of person would he be, if he *hadn't* wanted to save her brother's life? And what kind of person had she thought he was, and how could she be in love with a person like that, and *was* she in love with him? It was all very confusing. She shoved the thoughts down firmly, and looked at Ben.

"Did he have these wards up around his castle in your time? Do you know?"

Ben shook his head. "Armies were never able to attack Slytherin Castle directly; he always attacked first. The only force ever sent

against him vanished."

"Well, they did arrive," said Draco. "It just took them a thousand years to get here."

"There must be *some* way to knock the wards down," Ginny insisted. "If it takes Magid power, fine. Draco's a Magid, even if he doesn't know all that many spells -"

"Thank you for the ringing endorsement," said Draco.

Ben ignored this bickering. He was staring up at the sky, thumbs hooked into the scabbard of his belt. "Some larger kind of magic is at work, here," he said, looking somber. "Strange signs and portents - odd lights in the sky. Not to mention that one of my best archers was knocked out by a falling ottoman. Something," he said, firmly, "is up," and barely had he finished speaking when there was a gigantic rending cacophony; the soldiers all around them yelled and leaped backward as the walls around the castle collapsed into rubble with a thunderous crash.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Harry, what are you thinking about?"

"You know." Harry looked over at Hermione and gave her a wry smile. They were both a little out of breath from climbing what seemed like a thousand twisting stairs. The walls of the narrow staircase had grown steadily dryer as they had ascended up from the water, and they were mazed with rather pretty patterns of multicolored lichen and moss, in shades of gray, green and violet. Both Harry and Hermione were still soaking wet; Harry had wanted to use a Drying Spell on their clothes; but Hermione had nixed that idea: "No magic while we're in the castle." So they dripped, and squelched with every step. Harry's drenched clothes felt pasted to his body, the scabbard seemed to weigh a ton, and wet locks of black hair kept falling into his eyes. The discomfort wasn't much, however, compared to the worry nagging at his brain.

"Ron and Draco?" Hermione said. "I think the biggest danger there is that they´ll kill each other."

Harry looked sideways at her. He could tell perfectly well that she was trying to sound cheerful for his benefit. He always knew what she was thinking where he was concerned. What she was thinking where Draco was concerned was of course another matter. There she was a closed book. He had never really gotten a grasp on *what* she felt for their silver-haired ex-enemy, and wasn´t sure he wanted to. He knew he loved her; he knew she loved him. And Draco - Draco was as much a part of him as his own right hand. Sometimes an arthritic and painful hand, but still part of him. Some thoughts were just better buried.

"All right," came Hermione´s slightly breathless voice, cutting into his reverie. "What is it?"

"What´s what?" echoed Harry, falling back to earth with a thud.

"You. You´re feeling guilty about something, Harry Potter. I *know* you. There isn´t anything you could have done, by the way. The floor collapsed under us, if you recall."

"I know. I wasn´t feeling guilty about that."

"Well, you look like the guilt bus ran you down." She poked at him playfully with a wet finger. "Who´re you feeling bad about? Ron or Draco or both?"

"Both," Harry admitted, squelching around another staircase turn. "I shouldn´t have snapped at Ron - he´s just looking out for me. I can sort of see what Draco´s thinking - Ron can´t. I´ve got reasons to trust him Ron doesn´t. I shouldn´t have made him feel like I didn´t understand. And Draco - all right. He´s my friend -"

Hermione grinned. "Ouch. Did that hurt?"

"Quiet, wench. I´m on a roll here. I said he´s my friend, and given that he´s Malfoy, he´s been a good one. And he really would care if

I died, I realize that."

"Oh, Harry, for goodness sake. If you died..." She shuddered. "*He'd* die," she said, quietly -- so quietly that she wasn't sure Harry heard her.

He didn't seem to have. "I can't help feeling like if I'd been a better friend to him in the beginning, if I'd given him a reason to trust me about all this, he wouldn't have run off and none of this would have happened."

Hermione sighed. "He walked away from you, you know. From all of us. It was his choice."

"I don't know. Sometimes people walk away because they want you to leave them alone; sometimes they walk away to see if you care enough to follow them into hell. I think I went the wrong way."

"Don't say that. You're a good friend, Harry. The best anyone could have."

"Yeah." Harry knew he sounded unconvinced. "Maybe."

He might have said more, but they had reached the end of the staircase now. It terminated in a heavy-looking mahogany door studded with brass. The door handle was carved in the shape of a frog. Harry took hold of it and pulled, and the door slid open without even a creak of rusted hinges.

He stepped through the doorway and Hermione followed, her hand on the Lycanthe at her throat. They found themselves in a huge room, empty of any occupants. The floor was polished flagstones, alternating in darker and lighter squares like the pattern of a chessboard. High above was the ceiling, which like the ceiling of the Great Hall at school seemed enchanted to reflect the sky outside. At the moment it was a brilliant black field glittering with diamond-powdered stars. Huge tapestries hung along the walls, depicting scenes out of dreams: in one, a castle of bone rose from a bleak wasteland, in another a silver chariot shaped like a flower was driven across the sky by huge fiery-winged horses that reminded

Harry of the horses that drew the Beauxbatons carriage.

"It's beautiful," said Hermione, looking around. "And horrible."

But Harry was staring at something on the floor. "Hermione...what's that?"

She looked where he indicated. Inked on the floor in what looked disturbingly like - but certainly couldn't actually be - blood, was a circle inside of which was a sketched five-pointed star. In between the points of the star were drawn various symbols: a dot, a cross, a square, an oblong, and something that looked a bit like the letter "H."

"It's a Draxagram," said Hermione, looking a bit unhappy. "It's Circle Magic - this one's got a pentagram in it, so it's got something to do with summoning dark forces. Wizards use them for summoning magical creatures, especially powerful ones that you don't want to get out of control. They can't get out of the circle when they appear."

"What if you step into the circle?" Harry asked, morbidly fascinated.

Hermione shuddered. "Don't ask."

She turned away from the pentagram, and so did Harry. He followed her towards a raised dais in the center of the room, which contained the room's only furnishings, if such a strange collection of objects could be called furnishings.

In the center of the room were four slender golden pillars, set in a straight line. Harry could not imagine what they might be for. They looked like the supports for some massive tent, each about two arm's lengths apart. A few feet in front of the four pillars was a crystal sphere, rising upon the coils of a translucent green base in the shape of a serpent. In the heart of the globe burned a still flame, living, animate with a life so alien that Harry stared in fascinated horror. It was a thing he felt to be alive, even if it could not be alive. The flame inside the clear globe threw violent shadows over the walls, the tapestries, the bare flagstone floor.

"There it is," said Hermione, beside him, her voice soft. "The Orb."

He went over to it and laid his hand on it. Something about it was weirdly fascinating. He found himself overcome by a peculiar urge to touch the thing. Hermione came up beside him then and laid her own hand on the Orb. He found himself super-aware of her presence next to him, her damp sleeve pressed against his bare arm, the long curls of her hair tickling his throat. He turned and looked at her, at the line of her profile, marble-pale and serious in the dimly pulsing light of the Orb. Her cheeks were flushed to wild rose with excitement; she looked as she did when she had solved a particularly difficult Arithmancy problem.

"What is it?" he asked, his voice slightly husky, from the damp and perhaps from something else.

"I think we should try to open it," she said. "I mean, I´m the Heir of Ravenclaw, you have Gryffindor and Slytherin blood - we´re just missing Ginny, but maybe if we can get it to open a little ways, it´s better than nothing. And there wasn´t anything that said we all had to touch it at the same time."

Harry nodded and laid his hand over hers on the slick surface of the Orb. "*Alohomora*," they both said, her soft voice almost drowned out by his.

There was a flash of light from deep within the Orb: a radiant flash of deep red, followed by a pulse of deep blue. Something inside him tensed almost painfully, he waited --

Nothing happened.

Hermione looked disappointed. "It didn´t work," she said, taking her hand off the Orb, but keeping her fingers interlaced with Harry´s.

He turned and looked at her. Her damp hair curled in thick locks around her face, frizzing a little at the ends, and her wet robes clung to the outline of her body. The Orb threw scarlet patches of light

over her dress, her skin; she looked as if she were splashed with blood, and he felt his mind cast itself back, as if he were remembering, although the memories that came to him were nothing he had ever experienced. He saw the same room he was in now, and a woman in a blue dress stained all over with blood, cradling a dark-haired man in her lap and weeping inconsolably.

It was Hermione he heard crying, and yet it wasn't Hermione at all. Her familiar face blurred out of all recognition as he leaned back against one of the gold pillars, suddenly feeling very faint. For the second time that day he felt the sensation of steel going into his chest, this time thrust through from behind before his murderer spun him around and lowered him slowly to the ground, and leaned over him, and smiled at his death even as he bent and kissed the blood from his mouth. *Cousin. Best friend. Enemy. Murderer.*

"Harry?" Hermione's voice came from a long way away. He went on leaning against the wall, lost in a dark haze of memory, until he felt her small hands at his waist, loosening the scabbard there, and it clattered to the floor with the sword still in it and the mist lifted from his eyes as if a wind had blown it away. He heard himself taking deep, gasping breaths, and raised his eyes.

Hermione's face swam slowly into focus. She looked very anxious. "Harry?"

"I'm all right." He pushed himself off the wall, feeling his shirt stuck to his back with sweat and water. "I was just..."

"It's the Key," said Hermione, the anxiety in her eyes turning into sympathy. "It makes you...remember things." At his anxious look, she hastened to reassure him. "Not all the time. In dreams, and in certain situations."

"What kind of situations?" Harry demanded, although he had a feeling he knew. He looked around the room, then back at Hermione. "I think Godric died in here," he said.

She nodded without speaking, and drew him towards her. She rested her hands lightly on his shoulders, lifting her face to his. "I know,"

she said. "I felt it. Something awful happened in here; something heartbreaking."

He didn't say anything. There was a fierce pain inside him, made up of residual nightmare, the aftereffects of so many stresses and torments, the constant fear for his own life and for the life of those that he loved. He looked down at her, half-blindly, and saw her face, very white in the flaring and fading light of the Orb. "Harry," she said. Her eyes searched his. "I love you, you know that," she said quietly. "I always will."

He nodded, the tangled knot of emotions inside his chest tightening almost painfully as he looked at her, her eyes dark and earnest, fringed by lashes beaded with water. He remembered the first time he had ever kissed her, both of them drenched in rain, and a blazing stab of yearning and pain struck at his heart. Unthinking, he bent and kissed her, as he had not been able to for days, even weeks: hard and fiercely, as if hungry for something he had not even quite realized he was starving for.

She responded instantly, her hands locking across his back, lips opening under his. She stood on tiptoe, her back against the pillar, pushing her body against his, her head arched back, whispering into his mouth, repeating his name, *Harry, Harry, Harry*. Her eyes were closed, and he could see the leaping pulse in her throat, hammering as he touched her, his hands finding his way through the wet folds of her clothes as if he were pushing through damp leaves, peeling them away. He felt her body shake as he touched her and his mouth on hers trembling and he saw another room and another man, with untidy dark hair and dressed in scarlet, and a woman in blue, and the light of tawny candles glowing, and then behind them a door opened, and another man came in, and this one was dressed in black and silver...

Hermione gasped.

Harry spun away from her, his hand going to the scabbard at his waist, his damp fingers slipping over the hilt of his sword. But it was too late. Salazar Slytherin stood there in front of the glowing Orb, and in his left hand he held something silvery-gray and filmy, which



Harry recognized with a lurching swell of shock that almost knocked him off his feet.

James Potter's Invisibility Cloak.

\* \* \* \* \*

The castle was in chaos; Sirius had never seen anything like it. He had insisted that Lupin remove the still extremely weakened Fleur to the relative safety of the werewolves' den, where she could be protected. Lupin had allowed Sirius to borrow his Paw Paw wood and unicorn tail wand and Sirius was edging cautiously along the walls, map in hand, trying to orient himself in order to get closer to the dots marked *Virginia Weasley*, *Benjamin Gryffindor*, and *Draco Malfoy*.

Thundering down the corridors were creatures of all description, locked in mortal combat with regiments of wizards. A ten-foot swamp troll heaved its axe at a witch dressed in Hufflepuff gold; a beaky veela screeched and launched herself at a heavily armed witch in Gryffindor red, who dispatched her handily with a *Combustis* spell. A wizard in Ravenclaw blue was being chased round and round the stairwell by Raven, the banshee, who was shrieking and brandishing the Giant pike. Everywhere Oggrings were being dispatched in all their shapes and forms, and unpleasant black flying things glared with horrible fierce eyes, diving and biting at anything that moved. And *where was Slytherin?* He must be somewhere in the upper tiers of the castle, since he wasn't showing up on the abbreviated Map. This made Sirius even more nervous - what was he plotting?

His thoughts were firmly disrupted as he passed a set of double doors; they flew open, and out of them poured twenty or so skeletons dressed in brazen armor and carrying great axes. *Skolks*. They rattled and clanked across the floor. Sirius ducked back against the wall, but one of them - the captain, probably, for he had a scarlet plume flying from the top of his brass helmet - turned and glared at Sirius with darkly glowing red eyes. With a hiss, he lunged

at Sirius, who whipped out his wand and hurled a quick succession of spells at the creature, all of which bounced off its armor. Sirius had to duck to keep from being struck by a rebounding *Impedimenta* curse. He heard the whistle of displaced air as the Skolk's axe whipped just above his head; ducked, knowing it was useless, and then -

A hand grabbed the back of his robes and yanked him backwards as a flashing sword came down, leaving a trail of scarlet fire behind it in the air. It struck the skeleton in the shoulder, and the Skolk burst apart into a heap of tumbled bones. Silently, the other skeletons backed away, then turned and fled down the hall. Sirius saw the red stones in the hilt of the sword glitter as it was withdrawn, and thought, with mingled shock and relief, *Harry?*

He turned around, and saw, staring back at him with an expression of concern, James Potter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ginny seized Draco's arm so tightly that he winced. "*Sirius*," she said, and pointed.

Draco glanced where she indicated, and saw Sirius, leaning back against a wall further down the corridor, and standing in front of him, Ben. At their feet was a heap of Skolk bones - Draco had just dispatched several of them himself, and Ginny had quite impressively destroyed one by kicking it apart with her foot. Sirius was white as chalk; Draco had never seen him look like that. Surely he couldn't have been so badly put off by the Skolk; he was an Auror, after all. Then he twigged. *Ben*. Unprotesting, he let Ginny seize his hand and together they raced down the corridor to Sirius.

Ginny caught at Harry's godfather's arm. "*Sirius*," she panted. "This is Ben - Benjamin Gryffindor. Harry's *ancestor*."

Ben, having resheathed his sword, had been holding his hand out to Sirius and was looking extremely confused. "Is something wrong?"

The color came slowly back into Sirius' face. Draco looked at him, and felt a twinge of unhappy empathy. Until now, it hadn't occurred to him that a twenty-year old man who looked just like a dark-eyed, scarless Harry would be someone who looked just like James had when he had died. And behind the comprehension dawning in Sirius' eyes, there was something else. Disappointment.

Wearily, Sirius held his own hand out. "Nothing. I thought you were someone else. I'm Sirius Black."

Another one of the nasty black flying things swooped low overhead. Draco dispatched it with his sword, splattering green ichor all over Ben, who glared.

"Now we can continue to stand here exchanging pointless pleasantries and get hacked to death in the process, or we can go after the Orb," said Draco. "Thoughts?"

Ginny pointed. "Upstairs," she said shortly, fingering the Turner around her wrist.

They ran upstairs en masse, crouching low. The battle raged on around them, but something - probably the fact that they were with the Heir of Slytherin - kept most of the worst of it away from them. They raced quickly around the marble spiral staircase, Draco in the lead, turned several corridors, and found themselves standing before a set of carved malachite doors. The carvings depicted scenes of battle and court life.

Slightly breathless, Draco pointed at the door. "The Orb's in there."

"And so might Slytherin and dozens of minions be," pointed out Ben, fingering the hilt of his sword.

Draco looked at Ben, then at Sirius, and then, with a slight shrug, reached out, took the handle of the door, and pushed it open.

They all peered around the edge of the door. They saw a vast and empty room, in the center of which the jade-colored Orb sat

displayed on its serpentine pedestal. There was no sign of any other furnishings, save a series of strange markings on the floor.

"I'll go in and get it," said Draco, drawing his sword and looking at Sirius. "You lot, stand guard and make sure nobody comes in."

"I'm going with you," said Ginny. She shook her head at Draco's mutinous expression.

"Maybe we can get it open - I'm Hufflepuff, and you've got Slytherin and Gryffindor blood - if it doesn't work, we'll just take the Orb instead, but we might as well try. Anyway, it's safer in there than it is out here," and she gave him a little half-grin that was rather cute.

Sirius had his wand out and a determined expression plastered across his face. "You two go - we'll keep out anything that might come in after you."

Draco nodded at him and at Ben, who was staring off down the darkened corridor, his sword glimmering in the half-light. Then he took Ginny's hand, and ducked in through the open malachite doors. They stepped into the vast circular chamber, and as they did so, Draco distinctly heard the malachite doors shut and lock behind them with a sharp, audible click.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione knew what the gold pillars were for, now. She stood with her back against one, her wrists and ankles bound tightly to it with slender, steel-strong ropes. Harry, beside her, was likewise bound, only his right hand was also encased in an adamantine cuff which ran through the side of the pillar. Both of them had been too stunned to react when Slytherin had first revealed himself, and had lost precious seconds of time trying to recover from the shock. Harry had shoved Hermione behind him and as a consequence, she hadn't even seen Slytherin hit him with a Stunning spell. He had collapsed in front of her, and she had gone for her Lycanthe, but it

was already too late - Slytherin had flung an Impedimenta spell at her with bruising force, knocking her to the ground. She had blacked out momentarily, and when she had regained consciousness, no more than seconds later, she had found herself magically bound to a pillar, Harry across from her.

She could just see Harry over Salazar Slytherin's shoulder. He still looked groggy and dazed from the Stunning spell, and there was a spreading bruise on his cheek where the spell had hit him. Her heart ached, looking at him. As if he hadn't been through enough, as if they both hadn't been through enough. But why Harry, why always Harry?

Then Slytherin moved in front of her, cutting off her view of him. "I'm so sorry to have interrupted that tender moment you were having," he said, looking down at her out of his sleepy black lizard eyes. "Would you believe that I once interrupted my Rowena and my miscreant cousin Godric in this very room, in much the same...situation?" He cocked his head, and his eyes raked her face and then her body. She wanted to squirm away, but the ropes held her fast. "I imagine you would believe it, wouldn't you," he murmured. "A betrayal like that leaves its marks even down through a thousand years. And you appear to have the same rather disgusting proclivities that she did. How unfortunate, a pretty little thing like you. And I was almost planning to let you live, before. What a disappointment."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face away from him. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest, so filled with loathing it felt as if she might burst. Her one consolation was that without Ginny and Draco, he couldn't open the Orb. She hoped they were far, far away.

"What do you see when you shut your eyes?" he whispered, laying cold, long fingers against her cheek. "You remember, don't you," he said. "How it was, with us. The rooms in this castle, where we were together--"

Hermione's eyes flew open. "I remember nothing," she spat at him. "You're disgusting. Don't touch me."

"I am disgusting?" he snarled, and his lip curled back over pointed teeth. Her stomach lurched. He stepped back, taking his hand from her face. "You. I thought you were like *her*. I looked at you through his eyes and I saw he loved you as I had loved her. And so I took you. I would have made you my Source. But years of breeding with Mudbloods and Muggles has corrupted the pure line of her blood. You are not like my Rowena. You stood next to my Heir on the stairs and I saw how that sword burned your arm, and I realized. You are no Magid. You are nothing. An ordinary girl, *Muggle-born*, my servants tell me. Not worthy to be a Source of mine. Not worthy to wear her face, not worthy to have her blood run in your veins. You´re nothing."

Hermione glared at him in furious disgust. "She didn´t love you," she hissed. "I have her memories, and I *know*. All she ever was to you was something to possess and to control. And she realized that, and she didn´t love you. She loved Godric. All you ever were to her was something evil, something foul -"

He hit her. His ringed fist hammered up into her jaw and her teeth met in her lip in a burst of agony. She gasped and through the haze of pain that darkened her vision, she saw Harry throw himself forward, the ropes that bound him to the pillar dragging themselves out to their fullest extension, but it still wasn´t far enough for him to reach Slytherin.

And Slytherin turned and looked at him. And smiled. As terrible a smile as could be imagined. "Little Heir of Gryffindor," he said. "You look so much like him, but he was never as slight as you, or as breakable. But like you, I think, the most breakable part of Godric was always his heart. You wouldn´t have thought it to look at him, but there it was. Now -- *watch* me," he smiled, and Hermione heard with dread in her heart the torturer´s smirk in his tone. It was oddly reminiscent to her of Draco´s voice, as he had sounded years ago when his only goal in life seemed to be to hurt Harry as much and as often as possible. She tensed, feeling instinctively that Slytherin would go for her as the most direct way to hurt Harry. But he didn´t.

He lifted the Invisibility Cloak he had been carrying wrapped around his right fist, and from a pocket of his robes he drew a long, thin-bladed knife. He looked at Harry. And then he plunged the blade of the knife into the Cloak, shredding it. The knife tore through it with the sound of rending cloth that was also a also held a sound like screaming. Hermione gasped, but there was nothing she could do; within seconds the Cloak - that had been James Potter's, that had accompanied Harry, Hermione and Ron on so many adventures, that had saved their lives, that had been the one thing Harry had ever had that had once belonged to his father - was in ribbons around Slytherin's feet.

And Harry didn't move, or speak. He bowed his head, as if he was unable to look, but she saw his shoulders shake. And it was unbearable, the worst pain in the world, to see Harry suffer and to see him look defeated. She wanted to scream and to howl in rage and despair, and if she could have gotten free of her bonds, she felt sure she would have killed Slytherin with her bare hands. There was no sound in the room, except the sound of Harry's uneven breathing, and her own ragged gasps in her ears, and the sound of the door opening.

The *door*. Hermione flung herself around inside the ropes that bound her, and saw with mingled dread and amazement the double doors swing open as they had swung open for her and Harry, and Draco and Ginny walked into the room.

Draco went first, and Ginny came after him. He was gripping his sword in his hand, and Ginny had her wand out and ready. Their eyes raked the room, passing over the walls, passing over the pentagram on the floor, passing over the Orb, and then passing over Harry, Hermione and Slytherin - *and moving on as if they had seen nothing at all*.

An uncontrollable exclamation tore its way out of Hermione's mouth. "*Draco!*" she cried. "Ginny!"

Neither Draco nor Ginny turned around or reacted as if they had heard anything at all. Hermione's gaze went to Harry, and her heart faltered at the expression on his face. He was staring at Draco

fixedly, and with an expression of complete shock, as if he couldn't quite believe what was happening. She had a feeling he was trying to speak to him as he often did, mind to mind, and was getting...nothing.

Slytherin, meanwhile, was laughing. And taking no care to hide the noise he was making. "They cannot hear you," he said. "They cannot see you. We are behind an *Obfuscatus* charm - simple, but effective. Watch."

Hermione watched, helpless to tear her eyes away. She realized that she could not hear what Draco and Ginny were saying. Ginny had paused and was talking earnestly to Draco, one hand on his chest, looking up at him with dark, serious eyes. She wore a rather archaic-looking pair of breeches and an oversized black sweater that was probably Draco's: it swallowed up her delicate frame. Hermione could see the gold chain of the Time-Turner glittering against her throat. And Draco - slender in his dark clothes, with the sleeves of his shirt pulled up; she could see the black rose of the Dark Mark on the white skin of his inner forearm. He reached up a hand and pushed back the untidy silver hair from his forehead, glancing around the room, and she begged him silently, *see me, see me*. But he didn't. He shrugged finally, and then he reached out a hand and laid it on the surface of the Orb.

"No," whispered Hermione, and then louder, "No, NO!"

But they couldn't hear her. She saw Ginny speak, and then a deep flash of light came from the center of the Orb, the color of gold, followed by a pulse of dark green. Draco stepped back, his eyes widening, and then he caught at Ginny and pulled her back too as the Orb began to shake and tremble. Inside the globe, the animate flame flickered. Hermione heard her own caught breath achingly loud in the silence. The flame shook again. Then, abruptly, it went out. A sharp, crackling noise broke, and the crystal sides of the Orb split and fissured and rained down like shattered bits of eggshell. A plume of greenish smoke rose from the shattered remains of the Orb, and floated into the air, where it hovered for a moment. Then, like a falling arrow, it plunged towards Slytherin and drove into his chest.



Slytherin howled, as if he had been pierced through with a dagger, and arched his back as the green smoke arrowed into him. His whole body seemed to glow brightly for a moment with a luminous emerald halo. Then it vanished.

He straightened up then, and began to smile.

"What the hell?" Hermione vaguely heard Draco's voice as if from a long way away. He sounded flabbergasted. She didn't blame him. "How did that work --?"

Ginny looked as if she were about to answer him, raising her head - then she gasped, and looked straight at Hermione and Harry. Hermione had one split second to realize that now Ginny could see them, when Slytherin raised his hand. He pointed it at Ginny, and lovingly intoned, "*Wingardium levicorpus!*" and Ginny screamed as her feet left the floor and she flew across the room with lightning swiftness, slamming into the pole that stood next to Harry's. The same ropes leaped up and fastened around her, whipping swiftly around her arms and legs, binding her tightly.

Draco spun around. "Ginny--?"

He broke off, and stared. It was obvious he could now see them all as well. His eyes went to Harry and then to Hermione, and lastly to Slytherin, where they rested with loathing... and fear. Hermione had rarely seen Draco afraid. Angry, yes, whiny certainly, obnoxious often; but he was rarely afraid.

He looked afraid now.

It was perhaps that Slytherin seemed so different now; it was as if he had grown many feet in stature. He radiated power, a bleak and shimmering power. She had thought in the Burrow, when he was drawing on Fleur's magic, that he had seemed far more powerful than she remembered, but that was nothing to this. An ominously tinted light poured from his eyes, and a halo of intense and pulsing energy seemed to surround him. He stood tall, arrow-straight and terrifying, and his eyes were black as suns in his arsenic-white face.

He held out his hand to Draco. "Come here," he said. "Give me that sword."

Draco shook his head, but it was Ginny who spoke. "No."

Slytherin lifted his hand and touched it to the base of Harry's throat, sliding it down gently to rest just over his heart. Harry shuddered, but didn't say a word. Hermione watched with a horror that nearly took her out of her body. From the expressions on Draco and Ginny's faces, they were feeling much the same thing. "Do as I tell you," he said.

"You won't kill Harry," said Ginny finally, in a shaking voice. "You need him."

"I don't need all of him," said Slytherin, his voice very calm. He bent to pick up Harry's scabbard, which lay at his feet, and pulled the sword from it. Harry and Draco both started - it was again in one piece - but they didn't have time to think about why or how before Slytherin brandished the sword at Harry. "I can begin by slicing off his fingers, one by one. I'll make sure he doesn't bleed to death, not right away at least." Then he smiled and dropped the sword back onto the floor. "Or not. I need no such Muggle methods now, to make him scream." He turned his head, and looked at Harry. "You have felt the Cruciatus Curse before," he said. "But never with such power behind it as I possess now."

"No!" Hermione screamed, and jerked against her bonds so hard that they cut into her wrists, bringing blood. She didn't look at Harry, couldn't see him past Slytherin's back, looked instead over at Draco, who was deathly white, although his eyes were nearly black. He raised the sword in his hand, and threw it hard at the ground. It hit the flagstones with an echoing sound. Then he put his foot on it, and kicked it across the room towards Slytherin.

It skittered across the flagstones, sending up brilliant sparks.

Draco's eyes were bleak with hate. "Take it, then," he said.

"You were not worthy of it," said Slytherin, and, taking his hand

from Harry's throat, turned and held it out. The sword leaped into his grasp and he smiled down at it, lovingly. Then he turned to Draco, and held out his left hand. "Come here," he said, and Draco did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Draco felt his feet move against his own volition, carrying him forward like a piece of driftwood caught in a powerful tide. He fought it, bit down on his lip, tasted blood in his mouth. But it was useless. The Orb had opened, and so Slytherin had his powers back, and with them, the powers afforded him by his bargain with Hell. Draco felt himself driven forward, and then he stumbled and fell to his knees before the Snake Lord.

He looked up. Harry, Hermione and Ginny stared down at him from their prisons of rope. Ginny looked desperately furious, Hermione despairing and panicked, Harry's face was white, set and unreadable. And Draco saw that he was struggling, with as little evident effort as possible, to free his left hand from the ropes that bound it to his side. Draco couldn't imagine why he was bothering - Harry's left hand was as useless when it came to doing magic as his own right hand was to him. But he felt Harry reach out towards him, and his voice whispered softly at the back of Draco's mind: *Distract him.*

Draco's eyes flicked to Slytherin, who was gazing down at him with a sort of furious appetite. "We have come to the end now," he said, and his voice was low and even and resigned. "At the end of things, I meet them all again, and you, who were created for me. I planned you, a thousand years ago." He reached down and with a gesture that could almost have been called gentle, slid his hand under Draco's chin and tilted it upward. His eyes scanned the boy's face, and somehow, Draco knew what he was seeing: the clean even planes of cheek and chin and jaw, the long gray-silver eyes with their slightly tilted edges, the white-blond hair, too fine to tangle, and that he was recognizing it all as he might recognize a drawing he had done, years ago. There was no love in that look and no hate,

but something much colder and more removed even than that. His thumb ran under Draco's chin to his collarbone, and it took all of Draco's reserves of control not to pull away, retching with nausea. He kept his eyes fixed above Slytherin's shoulder - kept them fixed, in fact, on Harry, who had managed to free his wrist from one coil of rope, and was working on the second.

"A master craftsman made you," said Slytherin, and his voice was remote. "Or so I thought. But you are flawed, broken somehow, internally. There is a corruption in your blood. I see it as a blemish that will grow with time. I do not think you can be put back together again." He cocked his head to the side. "Tell me," he said.

Draco heard his own voice, dry and eroded-sounding, as if it came from far away. "Tell you what?"

"What do you see in them? Those three, that you love, in their different ways. I loved, once, as well, three such as those. Then I put that away, as I put away childish things. But you will not let it go. What can they offer you that I, who offer you everything, cannot?"

Draco shut his eyes. Printed against the back of his lids he saw them. Ginny, bright with spirit, Hermione, who he had loved, and Harry, who he knew better than his own self.

*What can they give you that I cannot?*

He raised his chin and looked at Slytherin.

"Hope," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slytherin's sharp intake of breath masked Harry's gasp of relief and the sound of the rope falling to the floor as he freed his left wrist. His right wrist remained shackled to the pole behind him, the cuff cutting into his skin. But he had the one hand free. Slowly he raised his hand to his mouth, and spit into it what he had been

holding there since he had watched Slytherin had bound them bind Hermione. The tiny, glowing white orb.

It had been a grueling effort not to talk, and a worse one not to shout in fury when Slytherin had struck Hermione. He was still shaking with the aftereffects of the effort it had taken not to react to that. He clenched his hand around the tiny orb in his fist, and stared at the tableau in front of him. Slytherin standing over Draco, his face a mask of barely-concealed rage, and Draco kneeling on the floor. Even kneeling, there was nothing submissive about him. He reminded Harry of a thoroughbred animal gone feral, baring his teeth at the Snake Lord. Harry had barely heard the last thing Draco had said. "*Hope*," it had sounded like.

"Get up," Slytherin barked, and Draco rose to his feet, so slowly that it bordered on insolence. Standing, he was as tall as Slytherin, yet seemed much smaller, perhaps because he was slighter, perhaps because of the aura of immense power that now seemed to hang over Slytherin like an adamantine cloak. "You," said Slytherin, "my little Heir, have been grit in my shoe, a needle pricking my fingers. An irritant. You have done nothing quite as I expected. But now, you will do exactly as I say, and you will see how small your petty rebellion truly is.

"Go to the Heir of Gryffindor. Cut his bonds and free him."

Harry saw Draco's eyes widen, his lips parting in surprise.

Slytherin said, "Take him to the center of the pentagram, and leave him there. The demons will know, then, that he is the offering." Draco's mouth turned into a bloodless line of shock, and Slytherin began to smile. "Then return, and kill the other two. After that, I might perhaps let you live."

Draco did not move. He stood where he was, head bowed and silver hair spilling over his face, hiding his expression. Slytherin reached out his hand then, and pointed almost lazily at his Heir. Harry saw the air between them shimmer, as if it had been displaced, and Draco lurched forward a little, losing his footing. It was the second ungraceful thing that Harry had ever seen him do. He almost fell

over, but the Snake Lord caught him, and held him hard by the arms. "I am going to send you away now," he said in a whispered hiss into Draco's ear. "A little punishment I devised for my followers, a thousand years ago when I could still bend Time and creation to my own whims. You will remain trapped in your own mind, Draco Malfoy, while your body stays here to serve me. *Mementorius!*" Slytherin cried, and there was a pulse of green light that burst between him and Draco like a firework. Then the Snake Lord released his Heir and left him standing, blinking and dizzy-looking, in the center of the room.

It seemed to take a moment for Draco to regain his equilibrium. He moved then, moving towards Harry slowly across the room, and when he reached him and stood in front of him and raised his head, Harry saw with a sinking heart the emptiness in the gray eyes that held his. He reached out with his mind, but it was like trying to put his arm through a concrete wall. There was nothing there. Draco's body stood before him, but his mind had gone, it appeared, far away.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was in a gray place, but it was not the place he had been when he died. He stood in the greyness — grey sky, grey walls — and a grey floor at his feet, with a shining Pattern running through it like the pattern of bones in a fossil. He realized somehow that it was the pattern of his own life, intertwining with the lives of everyone around him. Somewhere behind where he stood was each moment of his childhood, and before him was his future.

He took a step back. He was dimly aware that his body was somewhere else, doing something else, felt his fingers on ropes, unbinding them, but it didn't matter because where he really was, was here.

His foot came down on the pattern. And in a flash of memory, he was in a sunlit grove, riding with his father. He was eight years old and his father had broken the neck of his pet bird, and he was in

tears over it. And that was the last time he had ever cried. He moved on, shifting his feet over other memories, other scenes. Saw himself flying, in green robes; they were playing Quidditch, and he was trying to knock Harry off his broom. Not caring much if Potter died when he hit the ground. He saw himself insulting the memory of Cedric Diggory, saw himself on the train on the way home taunting Harry and his friends, but mainly Harry who he knew blamed himself for Cedric's death, watching his face as he spoke, digging the knife in, twisting it. The taste of these memories was bitter in his mouth. This was his life, laid bare like a flayed corpse, each moment of petty cruelty, each loss, each defeat, each lesser and greater evil.

He walked forward. He had come to a new part of the pattern now, where the thread of his life wound around and around another and a darker thread, and knew that this was where it intertwined with Harry's. This would be the moment he had taken the Polyjuice Potion. He saw the two lines stretching forward together, sometimes closer together and sometimes farther apart, and with many lines spiraling off from them into the distance, winding through them like threads in a tapestry, although he could not see where the lines ended, or which ended first. He took a step forward, and the voices rose again in his head, clamoring like thunder.

Hermione said, *Draco, I'm so sorry*. His father in the asylum cell, his voice like a whip. *You were born in the image he designed, with certain qualities: Magic powers. Viciousness and charm. Lack of empathy. Competitiveness. Cruelty*. Fleur smiled at him, tossing her hair. *Oh, evil. There is no such thing*. And Harry. *I thought you were my friend. Live with your choices, then, since your life means so much to you*. The Dark Lord's voice: *Is that your son, Lucius?* He shook his head as if he could free himself of the sounds that echoed there, heard his father's voice again, *You are, in the end, only what I made you to be*.

He froze where he was, hoping that if he just didn't move, the memories would go away, the voices would be silenced. But they remained, rising inside his head in a screaming cacophony, cutting off all other sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hermione stared in horror. Draco was kneeling again, his fingers unfastening the cords that bound Harry's ankles. She knew, of course, that he was being controlled, that otherwise this was something he would never do, but it was cold comfort given the danger Harry was in. Her eyes flicked towards the pentagram in the center of the room. It continued to glow eerily, and the glow had developed a strange and dreadful pulsing, . As if it were a door, shaking with vibration as someone - or something - tried to knock it down. She pushed the image away fiercely, and fixed her eyes on Harry. He was looking at her as well, and as she stared he gave her one of the sweetest smiles she had ever seen, and then he looked over at Slytherin, and back at her, drawing a direct line of meaning with his eyes. She knew what he was saying - *distract him* - and she swallowed hard.

"You're not as strong as you think," she said loudly, staring at Slytherin's back. He turned, as she had known he would. A thousand years had not made him any less susceptible to petty jibes.

He looked at her, his eyes inquiring, contemptuous. "Oh, really?"

"You think that little pentagram can keep back the forces of Hell?" Hermione snapped. "Look. Already it's eroding. The outline is fading. They'll be here in seconds, and they won't be too pleased that you tried to keep them out. Even all *your* powers can't hold them back. I've read about what happens to wizards who bind demons -"

With a snarl, Slytherin glared at her. "Silence, you stupid little Mudblood," he barked, turned his back on her, and stalked across the room to the pentagram. Heart pounding, she watched as he used his left hand to redraw the perimeters of the magical outline, glowing streams of green light issuing from his fingers as he moved them above the floor.

She turned her head back to Harry, and saw him raise his hand, and



throw something hard at the floor. The tiny white orb. It struck the flagstones and shattered, and from its shattering exploded a burst of blinding white light. The light leaped up, refracted and split into three white arrows. One arrow flew towards Hermione and struck against the Lycanthe at her throat. She felt it grow very hot, then cold. The second arrow soared towards Ginny, and struck her wrist where the Time-Turner was bound; the third flew at Harry, and the scabbard at his side glowed as the light collided with it. Harry raised his head and smiled at her again, this time with exultation.

*It worked*, he said, and it took a moment for her to realize that he had not spoken aloud, but that his voice was echoing in her head. She looked quickly over at Slytherin, who was still standing over the pentagram, his eyes on it; Draco, being lost in a world of his own, did not seem to have noticed anything.

*What WAS that?* Ginny's voice now, astonished.

*The last piece of the puzzle*, said Harry.

*The keys are all connected now*, said Hermione, in a passion of amazement. *Without us having to touch them or each other. Oh, good work, Harry!*

*I thought when they were connected they made a weapon*, observed Ginny.

*They do. They did*, said Hermione, a tiny spark of confidence growing inside her chest. *It's us. We are the weapon. All of us together have a strength that not one of us alone could possess.*

*But we're not all together*, said Ginny, and her eyes were on Draco.

*That*, said Harry, and his eyes were glowing with a steady green fire, *is going to change. Right now.*

\* \* \* \* \*

He stood where he was with his hands over his face, the darkness of semi-oblivion all around him. The memories and the voices in his head had ceased to make any sense and had become a meaningless and terrible chant that echoed in the caverns of his skull. He remembered dying. Dying had been better than this.

*Draco.* Another voice in his head, this one rising, separating itself from the cacophony of other voices. *Where are you?*

It sounded like Ginny's voice. But perhaps he was imagining things. Perhaps his mind had snapped. That was, after all, the purpose of the exercise, wasn't it. To break him. Still, this was the first voice he had heard in this place that wasn't accusatory or angry or reminiscent of some great sorrow. Maybe --

*Draco.* This time he was sure of the voice: it was Hermione's. *You've got to fight this, shake it off. We need you. Please.*

He raised his chin then, squared his shoulders. Looked around. He saw nothing - but perhaps the darkness had begun to fade, just a little bit. He could see bright lines of light, fracturing the dimness ahead of him. And if it wasn't his imagination, the clamor of voices in his head seemed to have died down.

*Are you there?* Hermione again. *Say something, tell me you're all right, please.*

*I'm here.* The words came with difficulty at first, then more easily. *But I can't leave this place. There's no up here, no down, no way out. Do what you have to do without me.*

*We can't.* It was Ginny's voice this time. *We need you and besides -*

*Besides, what?* With every word spoken, his thoughts were clearing. *What am I doing now?*

*You're untying Harry,* said Hermione reluctantly. *Slytherin will make you bring him to the pentagram and you have to fight this, Draco, you have to break it, it can't be worse than resisting the Imperius Curse -*

*There's no point. A dull and weightless despair had settled on him. Kill me, then. I give up.*

*Kill you?* Ginny's thoughts jolted with shock.

*Kill me. You're the Keys, the weapon. Destroy me if you have to. Death would be better than where I am now.*

*Oh come on, Malfoy. You can do better than that, and this time it was Harry speaking, not that any of them were really speaking, but he felt the shape of Harry's thoughts in his head, wry and familiar. Aren't you even going to try?*

*Leave me alone,* Draco replied wearily. *Go...away.*

*You know, Malfoy,* said Harry, sounding as if he had no inclination to go away and leave him alone, *you're a pretty good Quidditch player.*

*What? What's your point, Potter?*

*Maybe you bought your way onto that team, but you're a good Seeker, the best one I've ever played against. You make me watch my back. Nobody else ever has. I even like how determined you always are to beat me. I thought it meant you were a determined person. Strong. A worthy adversary. Not the type to just give up.*

*I'm not giving up.*

*Really? I'm sorry, I guess I was just confused by the part where you said 'I give up.'*

Draco felt his stomach clench, and for a moment the dimness wavered crazily around him. *Just kill me and end this right now,* he groaned, turning his face away.

*No. You know what they said. If anyone takes him down, it's going to have to be you. If you didn't think you could do it, Malfoy, you should have said so before; if you knew you were going to be too*

*weak and frightened and convinced that you don't deserve any better than this.*

He heard Ginny's voice again. *You think this is what you are, but it isn't.*

Then, Harry cut in over her. *Let me tell you something, Malfoy, there's no such thing as what you are. You want to believe it because it means you don't have to make any choices. But there are always choices. Every second of your life you're choosing to be one thing or the other. And that's what makes you who you are. So who are you, Malfoy?*

Draco spoke out loud, and heard his voice come out in a whisper. "I don't know."

Hermione sounded accusatory, no longer comfortable, no longer easy. *You don't know? Well, you better figure it out.*

*You can't just give up.* Harry's voice was harsh with desperation and with anger. *I thought better of you than this. Even when you weren't my friend, you were at least a worthy enemy. And now what? You're just going to let him control you and break you and not even try to fight it off? What's happened to you? When did you get to be such a coward?*

Draco's eyes flew open, and he stared down the narrowing tunnel of light and darkness. Something inside him swelled unbearably. He couldn't put a finger on what it was exactly, but heard his own breath in his ears, ragged with effort - felt his heart racing inside his chest --

*I'm not a coward,* he said.

*Aren't you? If it was me, I'd fight. But I guess that's just me. I've always had to fight for everything. I'm not some spoiled little rich boy who's had everything handed to him on a plate. You never had to get by on any merit of your own. I guess that's why you're so spineless.*

This was so monstrously unfair that it actually broke through the gray fog in Draco's brain. *Spoiled?* He could hear the rage in his own mental voice. *You goddamn know better than that, Potter. If you said that to my face, you know I'd break your fingers.*

*Would you?* There was half-suppressed laughter in Harry's voice. Trust Harry to be laughing at a time like this. *You always did talk a good game, Malfoy.*

*Go to Hell, Potter,* he said, furious.

*And funnily enough, that's exactly where I'm headed in about five minutes if you don't break through this thing. And you'll be the one who sends me there. How's that for irony?*

Draco felt his stomach clench, and he saw through the darkness - as if through a crack in glass -- the room he had just left, the wizard standing above the pentagram, Hermione and Ginny tied to their posts, and himself in front of Harry, undoing the last ropes that held Harry's right hand to the post behind him. Hermione's face was full of desperate concern as she looked at Draco, and so was Ginny's, her eyes huge and dark and searching, and he knew they were hearing every word he and Harry were saying. And Harry had his face tilted up, his eyes flicking back and forth as if he could somehow find Draco, wherever he was, and there was anger in his face, and a sort of desperation, and everything Draco himself was feeling as if he looked into a mirror.

Draco closed his eyes, the faces of his friends printed blindingly against his inner lids, and the something that had been growing inside him blazed up suddenly behind his eyes like a white pillar of fire. It was fury. Fury at Slytherin for imagining, for presuming, that he could control him through his own guilt, his all-too-human pain. He was Draco Malfoy and he would *not* be controlled, he would *not* be owned, and he would *not* be trapped against his will.

There was a shattering noise. The invisible puppet strings that had controlled him snapped, and he felt himself falling, hurtling really, through a great empty inner space. Something struck him, hard, and he opened his eyes. He realized knew that what he had felt was his

soul hurtling back into his body. He was standing directly in front of Harry, who was looking at him out of steady, dark green eyes. There was no fear in them at all, and as Draco returned to himself he heard Harry's voice in his head, clear and strong:

*Welcome back, Malfoy. I knew you could do it.*

Hermione and Ginny on either side of Harry were looking at him as well, and there was equal satisfaction in their faces. He felt the emotion that surged forward from all three of them, amplified by the power of the Keys, all four of them together, the Heirs, as they had always been meant to be. And he understood that that, coupled with his own anger, was what had torn him free of the spell that bound him, and understood as well exactly what he now needed to do.

He spun around, and reached out his hand. He felt the power of the other three pour into him, racing through the conduit of the Keys like electricity through wires. He saw Slytherin start in amazement, a look of disbelief spreading across his poison-pale face. Draco laughed, and as Slytherin took one incredulous step forward, Draco whispered, "*Accio*" and watched with delight as his fingers, obviously against his will, pried themselves one by one off the hilt of the sword. Draco reached out, and the sword, released from Slytherin's grasp, flew into his own. Exultation running through his veins, Draco stepped toward the Snake Lord, carrying the sword in front of him like a wave of brilliant green fire.

Slytherin staggered back, a look of horror convulsing his features. It was the first human look Draco had ever seen there. An inarticulate cry tore from his throat and he thrust out his hands as if to ward Draco off. "*No!*"

Draco brought the sword down, a wave of brilliant green fire. The blade struck against the Snake Lord's wrist, neatly severing his hand. He shrieked aloud as fire poured from his wounded arm, an indescribable shriek of rage and horror, and his severed hand tumbled at Draco's feet. Beyond disgust, beyond anything but a terrible sort of euphoria, Draco seized the mutilated hand of the Snake Lord, clamped the fingers tong-like around the hilt of his

sword, and flung them together into the pentagram inked on the floor.

He threw his head back then, and, his voice furious and carrying, shouted at the invisible forces of Hell. "*There you go! Your half of the bargain! Given to you by his own hand, the hand of the Snake Lord himself! Take it, damn you, and use it!*"

There was a dreadful silence. The Snake Lord had fallen to his knees, clutching the stump of his hand, from which little tongues of flame flickered between his fingers. There was no blood.

And then.

A sharp noise erupted, and the walls around them suddenly split and fissured, long black cracks forking through the walls like the tracks of lightning. Draco spun around, and saw the others standing behind him, wide-eyed, free from the entangling ropes. Their bonds had simply withered away. They were all staring, and for good reason. From the middle of the inked pentagram, several dark shapes had appeared, crouching, and then rising. Draco heard Slytherin yelling in furious terror, but only at the very periphery of his consciousness. He was too busy staring. The shapes were not the demons he expected, but huge creatures, much taller than human men, with eyes like burning coals and black wings shot through with gold.

They were both horrible and beautiful as they stepped out of the circle and closed in around Slytherin, who was crouching on the floor. Draco saw him raise his silvery head as they closed in, and he howled out something unintelligible.... though it could have been a name...

Draco never knew what it was. He would have liked to have thought that in his last moments, the sorcerer might have had a momentary flash of humanity, and cried out for Rowena. But most likely he was howling out one final malicious spell.

Draco felt the floor surge under his feet. The castle was coming apart. Something caught at his arm. Harry, probably. Darkness was

pouring up from the center of the pentagram like fog. It poured over Slytherin, over the demons who stood above him, exulting, over the flagstone floor, and then it was upon them. The last thing Draco heard as darkness took him was the sound of the Snake Lord's screams.

\* \* \* \* \*

When consciousness returned, Draco found that he was lying on his back with his head pillowed on someone's lap. Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked up. Backlit by the moon, a figure was bending over him. He saw long waving hair and a pale oval face, dark eyes and a worried mouth. Hermione. She smiled when she saw he was awake.

"Welcome back," she said.

He started to struggle into a sitting position. "Harry - Ginny - "

"Shh. Everyone's all right." She touched his face lightly, and then turned her head. "Harry!" she shouted. "*Ginny!*"

"Don't yell," said Draco firmly. "My head is splitting."

She grinned at him. "Poor baby. Here." She scooted back, and helped him into a sitting position. It was true that his head was pounding, but it didn't matter. He felt light, as if a huge weight had been lifted off him, as if he'd spent weeks in a dark shuttered box, and now the lid had been pulled off and at last he could look up and see the stars. For the first time in many days, he was no longer cold.

He propped himself on his hands and glanced around. He was sitting on grass, and grass stretched all around him, a wide green untenanted meadow in between a circle of trees. Of the castle which had stood there, with its walls and battlements and towers, there was no longer any sign. The sky overhead was streaked with explosive color: blue, green, scarlet and gold, bright as the Aurora Borealis, and through the washes of brilliant color the stars glittered



like towering crystal cities Far off to the right he could see a glimmer of bright scales, a towering form: Feroluce the dragon, and just below Feroluce, two small figures: one in dark red robes, the other with dark red hair. Ben and Ginny.

"Hey! Malfoy!" There was a thud as Harry dropped to his knees next to Draco. He was, if possible, even filthier, covered in soot and bloodstains, but he was grinning all over his face. He gripped Draco's shoulder hard for a second, and Draco looked back and gave him a half-surprised smile. "You missed the coolest part," Harry announced.

"Damn," said Draco mildly. "Because I was so enjoying the fun we were having right up until I passed out."

"It was not cool," said Hermione, looking slightly ill. "Slytherin caught on fire, and he...sort of burned without actually burning up. And the demons dragged him into the pentagram while he was screaming and then they all just vanished into the floor with this huge sucking sound, and everything in the room started sliding down into the hole, and you fainted and nearly fell into the hole too, but Harry caught you. And Sirius and Ben came charging in because the doors broke apart. Sirius carried you out. The whole castle came apart, piece by piece and all the Dark creatures fled into the woods, the dementors too. I've never seen anything like it. Lupin said it was a retrodimensional timeshift collapse - he's over there with Fleur. She's fine, by the way."

"Sounds like I missed some good times," said Draco.

"Then I'm telling it wrong," said Hermione positively. "It was quite horrible. And Harry thought you were dead and made a spectacle of himself."

"I did not," protested Harry, but he didn't look particularly bothered. He craned his neck around. "Where's Sirius?"

Hermione got to her feet. "I'll get him. He was talking to Ben about what to do about the army." She smiled down at Draco. "Ron told him you killed a Dementor, so he wants to hear all about it."

Draco nodded, just about too exhausted to speak. It wasn't a bad exhaustion, however. Even though it was a cool night, and he was sitting on wet grass, and his body felt like a giant bruise, he nevertheless felt his eyelids drooping, as if he were sinking back into the blissful comfort of the first real sleep he could remember having had in weeks.

*Malfoy.* Harry's voice spoke in Draco's head. Draco was grateful that he didn't have to open his eyes or move to respond. *I thought it was time to give you this back.*

Now Draco did open his eyes, and saw Harry holding something out to him that glittered bright as sunlight in his hand. The Epicyclical Charm.

He shook his head faintly. *I don't want it.*

Harry looked surprised. *But it's your life.*

*I know.* Draco leaned his head back against the tree trunk. *I don't want the responsibility for my life. Not right now. Hold onto it for a little while.*

*All right.* Harry looped it back around his throat, looking somber. Not unhappy, though. *Thanks, then.*

Draco shut his eyes again. The exhaustion was folding in around him like a blanket. He vaguely heard other people arriving, sitting down around him in a circle in the grass - heard Sirius' voice, heard Harry greet Ron (awake again) happily, heard Lupin speak to Fleur in French, heard Hermione's laugh, and then Ginny's soft voice in response. There was a soft touch on his arm; he heard Lupin ask how he was doing, and Harry said that he was fine, just tired, and they should let him sleep; he heard Sirius say that the Ministry was on their way; he heard Ginny announce, some sadness in her voice, that Ben had gone, and his army had gone back with him. The voices became fainter and fainter, like music heard from another room, and then one last voice bent close and whispered in his ear.

"Draco." It was Ginny. Her voice was barely a murmur. "There's one thing you should see before you fall asleep." She leaned over, and he felt her hand on his left arm, pulling up his sleeve with great gentleness. He half-opened his eyes and looked down, and it was a moment before he realized that what he was looking at was not an object she wanted him to see so much as the lack of an object - on the fair inner skin of his forearm, which had borne the skull-and-serpent sign of the Snake Lord, there was no longer any mark.

References: The Pattern that gives Draco flashes of memory and represents his life is inspired by the Pattern in the Chronicles of Amber series by Roger Zelazny. Oggrings and skolks are from Tanith Lee's White Horse, Black Castle.



## Chapter Fifteen - Mattress of Wire

So say goodbye to all those ne'er do wells  
Smile in religion and then smile farewell  
Your magic doesn't need the failing spells  
Of those that never understand  
And manners, they will find no place  
With those that have no saving grace  
With you I see the irony  
Of anyone who has no faith.

Aztec Camera, "Mattress of Wire"

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On the evening before Harry Potter's seventeenth birthday, not two weeks after his last glimpse of Salazar Slytherin, Draco left the Manor, where Harry, Hermione, Sirius and Narcissa were playing Exploding Snap by the fireplace, and went and sat on the hill overlooking the house where they had buried what remained of his father. The night was beyond clear, as if someone has stretched a sheet of glass across the sky, through which the starlight shimmered with a diamond brilliance. It had rained that day and all around him the grass was wet, each blade glittering like a nail driven into the ground. Above him rose the mausoleum erected to the memory of his father. It was hewn black onyx and its unreflective surface seemed to draw in the darkness of the night.

He wasn't sure what he had hoped to accomplish by sitting here all night; whether he was saying goodbye, or had hoped to have some communication with his father's ghost, and what he would say to that ghost if it appeared. Nobody had tried to stop him from going; they were all being so *careful* around him these days, as if he were something terribly fragile that might break. Not that all of them who were at the Manor now - himself and Harry, Hermione and Ginny and Ron, Sirius and Lupin and his own mother - hadn't been

through the same nightmare, but *he* had been its focal point. The darkness had touched them all, but only Draco had nearly been swallowed up by it, had been inside it, had *been* the darkness. The Dark Mark was gone from his arm, but the memory of everything that had happened still burned against the back of his eyes. There was still so much to be sorted through, to be understood, to be forgiven and to try to forget. He found himself restless, wandering the dark halls of the Manor at night, startling his own reflection in mirrors, looking for answers and finding none.

Harry's birthday was tomorrow, and there would be a party, and he did not want to go. Sirius had wanted to make it a joint birthday party for the two of them, but Draco had refused. He didn't want a party. So there had been a quiet dinner for him the week before, and he'd been given presents, which initially he didn't want either. New dress robes from his mother, a black leather *Filoparch* from Hermione, and Ginny had given him a book. Charlie Weasley had sent him a glass figurine of a dragon that spit Undestructive Flames at the top of every hour. And Sirius had given him a sword to replace the one the demons had taken back - it wasn't a Living Blade, of course, but then nothing really was. Harry had rather unexpectedly given him a scabbard to go along with it, which was enchanted with a protective spell that kept the wearer from bleeding when wounded. He supposed Harry felt that he had seen enough blood, his own and others', to last a lifetime.

Draco rose to his feet and looked down at the Manor, gray in the dim light. Familiar. The enormous terrace running all around the tall square stone house with its mansard roof. At each corner they small round towers with tall narrow windows in them. Good for Banishing hot oil onto advancing enemies. Shadows moved behind them now. He thought of the others, sitting before the fire, calm in each other's company. The firelight on Ginny's hair, Hermione's laughter, Harry quiet as always.

Enough. Draco brushed the wet grass from the knees of his trousers, and made his way over to the side of the mausoleum. Into the side of it block-carved silvery letters had been cut: Lucius Malfoy 1958-1997. *Arte Perire Sua*.

"Hello, Father," said Draco softly, placing the flat of his hand against the cold stone. He stood for a moment, hearing the sound of his own voice, chill in the silence, feeling the beat of his heart. "It's been a long time since we've talked. At least, it feels that way."

Silence and the cold night answered him. He turned slowly until his back was to the marble wall and he was staring out at the darkness, punctuated by the coolly glowing lights of the Manor in the distance.

"I've thought about you a great deal lately, Father. You might be surprised to hear it, but it's true. Maybe not consciously, but you were always in the back of my mind. I think *he* wanted to be a sort of father to me, Slytherin I mean, only he wasn't any better at it than you were. He just wanted the same thing you did - a tool, something use, to advance his own power. You played at being God, made me in the image the Dark Lord wanted. Never really wanted a son at all. Well, you're not God, Father." He heard his own voice rise and sharpen, cutting the warm summer air. "And I'm not weak. You told me I'd break like a clock wound backwards. But I didn't break." He closed his eyes then against the flutter of images which whipped past like a deck of cards falling, randomly upturned: saw himself standing in his father's cell at the asylum, backed against the wall, saw the top of Slytherin's tower scorched clean by flame, saw Harry lying as if dead while the blood ran out from under him like costly dye spilling over the floor, saw the black demons who rose out of Hell to reclaim what was theirs. Out of Hell. *Hell, where you are, Father. Hell, where you would send me.*

He heard Lucius' voice. *You are, after all, only what I made you to be.*

The words seemed spoken inside his brain. He heard them out. And then it came, what he had waited for, half-expecting, half-dreading: grief like a roiling black wave. It rolled up and over him; he didn't feel the wall of the mausoleum until he fell against it, and he only half-saw the shape of the great black dog as it crested the hill,

looking at him with its great pale eyes like jewels in the darkness.

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Sirius saw Draco fall against the wall of the crypt, and hesitated. Draco had his hands up over his face, his shoulders tensed and shaking. Without knowing exactly its cause, its impetus, Sirius recognized this kind of grief, these stifled gasps that seemed to push the boy down the wall like the weight of an enormous fist, so that eventually he sat on the ground with his arms wrapped around himself, head buried in his hands. He himself had wept like that in Azkaban, dryly, in sorrow and rage.

It was enough. He straightened up out of his canine form and stepped forward. Never having done anything quite like this before (not even for Harry, although he would have, if he had been called upon), he went over to Draco, knelt down next to him, pried him firmly from the wall, and took him in his arms as if he had been a child of six and not a boy of seventeen.

Draco didn't struggle, just grasped onto Sirius tightly, and Sirius realized to his surprise that in fact Draco *wasn't* crying. Something else was happening to him; something more complex and harrowing than tears. His body trembled, the gasping paroxysms tearing through him, but no tears came, and Sirius remembered Narcissa having told him that her son didn't cry. But that was impossible...everyone cried. He held onto Draco as the boy shook, rubbing his back a little awkwardly, but soothingly, as he would hold and soothe an injured animal. "Cry," he said. "Cry, if you have to, if you can," but Draco pulled away from him and sat back against the cold dark marble of the mausoleum, shaking his blond head. His face was blank, and dry of tears.

"No," he said. "I can't."

"There's nothing wrong with it," said Sirius gently. "Enough has happened to you; you're more than entitled."

"No," Draco said again, more urgently this time, "I *can't*," and he turned his head back towards the mausoleum, and fell silent. And



Sirius sat, silently, with him, until the sun came up and its light broke over the Manor, and it was Harry's birthday.

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"Where *are* Draco and Harry?" Sirius demanded, as the sixth post owl of the day landed on the library desk, depositing a heap of parcels labeled *H Potter* and *D Malfoy* on the polished rosewood surface. "This is getting ridiculous...presents...fan mail....*more* pairs of leather trousers...."

"They're upstairs," said Ginny, who was sitting on the window-seat with Hermione. Dresses for both of them had been delivered by the previous owl, and they were deep in conversation on the topic of what they were wearing that evening. "They're getting all sweaty."

"They're *fencing*," Hermione corrected, looking stern.

"I stand by my terminology," said Ginny loftily, poking at a shiny length of taffeta with her wand and turning it from blue-green to scarlet. "There, that looks better."

Hermione made an approving noise. "Good color for you, Ginny."

The door banged open and Draco came in, followed by Harry. Both boys were flushed and sweaty with exertion, both grinning. Harry had his arms crossed over his chest and was arguing some finer point of fencing etiquette with Draco, whose silvery hair, Ginny noted, was mussed appealingly all round his head. Draco was telling him that he should consider himself blessed that he had at least finally mastered the knowledge of which end of the sword to poke into the enemy.

"Enemy?" echoed Harry, grinning over at Draco.

Draco's mouth quirked. He looked down at himself - he was dressed in worn jeans and a t-shirt that shuck to his shoulders with sweat - and then back at Harry. "Opponent," he corrected himself.

"Git," said Harry, determined to have the last word, winked over at

Sirius, and went to sit by Ron and Hermione, who hastily shrank the dress in her lap down to hand-size with a *Reductus* charm, and shoved it behind her. She grinned up at Harry, who bent and kissed her upturned face.

"Don't think I don't have the perfect retort for that, Potter," said Draco loftily, perching himself on the edge of the desk and poking curiously at the pile of parcels. "Oh, yes I do. And its day will come. But I will let you off the hook on account of today being your birthday."

"Listen to this," said Ron, rolling over on his back and holding the Prophet open above him. " *Happy Birthday Harry*: The interest of the wizarding world, so long riveted on the mysterious disappearance of the Boy Who Lived, will tonight center around a much happier event: his seventeenth birthday party, held this year at Malfoy Manor, the ancient familial seat of the powerful Malfoy clan, now home as well to Sirius Black....all right this bit's boring, so I'm skipping it...enormous guest list, blah blah, hundreds of wizards and witches invited, blah, including MOM Arthur Weasley, and Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, miraculously recovered from his state of magically induced stasis..." "A miracle of wizarding medicine," says Dr. Simon Branford--"

"It was NOT a miracle," snapped Ginny irritably. "It was because Draco killed Slytherin, so all his spells ended."

"Branford's a bit of a prat," said Sirius absently. He was engaged in using his wand to flip open the various boxes littering his desk. Draco, lounging against the side of the desk, watched with half-interested, lidded eyes.

"But you invited him to the party anyway," pointed out Narcissa. "Is there anyone you *didn't* invite, Sirius?"

Sirius shrugged. "I wanted Harry to have a big celebration," he said, winking over at his godson. "To make up for all those missed birthdays."

"I'd rather have big presents than a big party," said Harry, sliding down to sit on the floor next to Ron, with his back against Hermione's legs.

"Size doesn't matter, Harry," said Ginny, with a grin.

"Oooh, a zinger from little miss Weasley," said Draco, a smile curling his mouth. "And here I was worried that you'd been depressed ever since we sent your boyfriend back to the Stone Age."

"He was not my boyfriend, and it was the Dark Ages," said Ginny, and pretended to be distracted by something moving along the edge of Sirius' desk. "What are those, Sirius?"

Sirius glanced over. "Oh, the action figure prototypes."

"The WHAT?" demanded Ron.

Harry looked sheepish, Draco smug.

Sirius shrugged. "The same people who do the Chocolate Frog cards wanted to know if they could market action figures of Harry and Draco...as a promotional device. So they sent some prototypes for approval."

"And did you approve them?" demanded Ginny, fascinated. She got to her feet just as the Draco action figure poked the Harry action figure hard in the back, sending it tumbling off the edge of the desk. The Draco action figure chortled to itself and did a malevolent dance. Ginny bent down, picked up the little Harry figure -- which looked just like him, in miniature scarlet Quidditch robes -- and set it on its feet. "Poor Harry," she said.

"No, we didn't approve them," said Sirius. "Chocolate frog cards are enough -- Draco and Harry don't need their faces plastered on all the wizarding billboard from here to Ottery St Catchpole, selling everything from Toothflossing Stringmints to fancy broomsticks."

"Besides, I didn't like mine," said Draco, looking critically down at the miniature Draco, which looked like an exact copy of himself,

even down to the tiny smirk. "It doesn't look like me...if you catch my meaning."

Harry glanced over. Obviously \*he \* caught Draco's meaning. "You took the clothes off your action figure, didn't you, Malfoy?"

Now Draco looked slightly pink. "Well, I--"

Harry's eyebrows drew together. "Did you take the clothes off *my* action figure?"

"Will you look at the time," announced Draco, and scooted sideways towards the door. "I must go get dressed."

Ginny and Hermione bubbled with laughter as Harry jumped to his feet, stepping over Ron, and stood with his hands on his hips, glaring. "Malfoy!" he yelled, as Draco fumbled with the door handle. "Get back here!"

At that moment there was a loud POP and Arthur Weasley's head and shoulders appeared in the fireplace. Draco paused by the door. "Hallo, Sirius," Arthur said genially, shedding soot.

"You're early," said Sirius, glancing at the clock over the mantel.

"Lo, Dad," said Ron, waving but not getting up.

"I'm not staying," said Arthur. "I just wanted to let you know that I've heard from Charlie down at the camp-- he will be able to come after all. I know it's last minute --"

"Good," interrupted Sirius, looking genuinely pleased. "It's no problem, Arthur. I told you to bring the whole family."

Hermione looked over at Draco. His face wasn't nearly as expressive as Sirius', but she could tell from the quick flash of his eyes that he, too, was pleased that Charlie would be there. As if he felt her gaze on him, his eyes slid over to Hermione, and locked with hers for a moment. She read the message in them clearly, and got to her feet.

"I'd better go get dressed," she said, lightly touching Harry's shoulder.

He looked up at her. "We've got hours yet."

Ron snorted. "You *know* how long it took her to get ready for the Yule Ball."

"Good point," said Harry.

"Maybe if you spent as much time on *your* hair, Harry," Hermione said, and avoided with a little hop his playful swipe at her ankle. She felt Draco's eyes on her as she left, and hoped Harry wouldn't notice, and that Draco would have enough sense to wait a decent interval of time before he followed her out of the room.

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She was just laying her dress out on the bed when she heard his knock.

Wearing a black Chinese silk robe and slippers, Hermione crossed the room and drew the door back, and for a moment, when she saw Draco standing there in the doorway with the torchlight behind him turning his hair into a silvery halo, she felt a sour-sweet ache at the back of her throat, and swallowed hard against it. He was wearing dark robes and his hair was damp, as if he had come straight from the shower. He smelled faintly of soap and lemon zest. "Draco. What is it?"

"The last of the ingredients," he said, and held out a diffident hand towards her. He was holding a dark-brown wrapped parcel, and Hermione smiled as she reached and took it out of his hand.

"Rosemary, spiderwebs, dried forget-me-nots," she said, peeling back the wrapping on the parcel and peering inside. "That's everything. Well, almost everything."

Draco leaned against the architrave. He seemed disinclined to come into the room, and equally disinclined to leave. "What else do you

need?"

"You," she said, without thinking.

He raised his eyes up to hers, and she felt herself flush at the momentary wicked flash of almost-laughter that brightened, then darkened his expression. It was easy sometimes to forget, with Draco, that spark of dangerousness that threaded behind his every expression like a live current.

He held his arms out, crossed at the wrists, and smiled blandly at her. "Whatever you need," he said.

She didn't reach to take his hands. "Go sit on the bed," she said.

He went obediently and sat on the bed, where he clashed horribly with the pink, flower-sprigged duvet cover. Hermione scooped the remainder of the Pensieve ingredients up off her bureau and went to sit opposite him. She placed the shallow white bowl between them, dropped into it the ingredients Draco had brought her, mixed with a Memory Potion she had made the day before and some yarrow root. The mixture smoked and steamed a little before settling into a greenish paste.

She looked over at Draco, who looked mildly anxious, as if he were about to have his pulse taken. "Now it's up to you," she said. "Usually you'd need a wand at this point, but I suppose in your case you can do it without. Just concentrate on the memories you want preserved in the Pensieve, then draw them out and put them in the bowl."

"Thanks," he said, his silver eyes unreadable. She sensed that he wanted to be left alone for a moment, so she stood, retrieved her dress, stockings and shoes from the bed, and went into the adjacent bathroom to change, closing the door firmly behind her.

The dress she had chosen to wear that evening was modeled as closely as memory allowed on the dress Narcissa had given her to wear at the Mansion so many months ago - still her favorite article of clothing she had ever owned, albeit briefly. Only the color was

different: a dark rich cinnamon brown instead of lilac. It had the same fitted bodice, lacing up the back, the same full skirt and wide scooped neck showing rather more of her shoulders and the top of her chest than she was generally used to. With it went sheer silk stockings and a dramatic pair of high, strappy shoes. She glanced at herself in the tiny mirror over the sink but it gave her back only a tiny part of her reflection, so, gathering up her full skirts with one hand, she went back into the bedroom.

Draco was still sitting on the bed, staring down into the Pensieve, in which a whitish smoke was now swirling. When he saw her, his eyes widened and then darkened, and although all he said was, "All dressed up, then?" she knew he admired the way she looked, and, more than that, remembered the original dress that this one was modeled after. Of course he would. Draco noticed things like that.

"You're done," she said, indicating the Pensieve with a jerk of her chin.

Draco nodded. "Mmm. It was easy."

She went over to the larger mirror that hung over the vanity table. She looked at herself briefly, then picked up the necklace she'd been planning to wear that night - a topaz on the end of a silver chain - and reached to drape it around her throat. Feeling unaccountably nervous, she fumbled the clasp.

Draco stood up, putting the Pensieve down on the bed. "You want help with that?"

"Oh. If you don't mind." She hesitated for a moment, then reached around and put the necklace into his hand. He looped the slender chain, bowing under the weight of the smoky topaz charm, around her throat, and paused, his hands just brushing the curve where her neck met her shoulder. She felt the tiny hairs all up and down the sides of her arms prickle as he looked at her, his eyes gone dark and serious, and suddenly she saw herself as he saw her -- the smooth curves of pale-peach skin rising from the bodice of cinnamon silk, the very dark curls of hair, so carefully arranged, looping like hyacinth tendrils around her face, her wide dark eyes, her full lower

lip, trembling now with nervousness. The feel of his hands on her skin was familiar and not familiar -- he was so much a part of Harry, although he looked so different. If she closed her eyes, she had to remind herself whose hands were on her. Silver hair not black, gray eyes not green. She spun around in the circle of his arms and heard the snap as he closed the clasp of the necklace, and stepped back and away from her.

He was breathing quickly. "Done," he said lightly.

"Draco --"

"Don't," he said, and then, "You look beautiful."

And she knew she did, maybe more beautiful than she would ever look again. She spoke then without thinking. "Is there something between you and Ginny?" she heard herself ask.

The words hung there between them, and for a moment she saw him look suddenly vulnerable -- he had gained back some of the weight he'd lost during the past months, but his shoulders still seemed narrow under the thin cloth of his shirt, the planes of his face very sharp. He said, weighting his words carefully, "For there to be something between me and Ginny, there would have to be something of myself I could give her. And I don't think there's much of me left to give anyone right now."

"Draco. You're the wholest person I know."

"More so than Harry?"

"You're the same."

He shook his head. "I have to wait."

She bit her lip. "Don't wait to be happy," she said, her voice tight.

"Is that what you want for me?" he said, and there was a little edge in his voice, the bright cutting side of a razor. "To be happy?"



"More than anything," she said, and there was truth in that, and a little bit of a lie.

He stood there for a moment, very still. Then he turned and lifted the finished Pensieve off the bed. "Thanks for this," he said. "I couldn't have - not without you."

"Draco --" she burst out, without really knowing what she was saying, "if things were different -"

"Stop," he said, and she did. He looked at her for a long time, standing so still that every previous stillness of his seemed an incomplete copy of this one. Finally, he spoke, and she closed her eyes as he spoke, hearing only the cadences of his soft voice, and the words it shaped. "For a long time," he said, "I waited to hear you say that if there was no Harry in your life, then you would be with me. I waited, but you never said it, and finally I realized that you never would. Not because you don't want me. Just because it doesn't matter. Because you would never imagine a life for yourself without Harry in it."

She looked at him, profoundly shaken. Her voice, when she spoke, was just above a whisper, "You can love more than one person at once, you know."

"Oh, yes," he said. "I know."

"But you have to make choices," she said.

He looked away from her. The torchlight painted his pale hair with gold. "We are only given one life," he said. "I remember."

Her heart contracted. "Draco--"

"I'll see you at the party," he said, and backed towards the door. She stared at him as he went out, letting the door slam shut behind him. Then Hermione stood and looked after him for a long time.

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Sirius looked around himself in wonder. Narcissa had transformed the Manor's grand ballroom, previously a vast, dank, and cavernous space, into a wonderland of light and color. On the western terrace, Sibby Malone & The Electric Piccolo Band's Roadie Elves were setting up the band's gear. The heavy velvet drapes had been stripped from the huge floor-to-ceiling windows that ran the length of the western wall; beyond the windows, the grounds could be seen, sloping down to a lake the color of dark malachite and a distant border of trees. Above the treetops, the sun was going down in a welter of blood and topaz, suffusing the ballroom with a rose-glowing, ethereal light.

Not that it needed any more light. Everywhere were strung ropes of glowing multicolored lanterns. Their shapes changed as they twisted lazily in the air -- a lamp would be a glowing bee at one moment, a radiant starburst the next. The lanterns cast deep patches of color against the pale marble floor, patterned with glowing golden stars in the shapes of familiar constellations. Narcissa had consulted a professional Diviner who assured her that the configurations of the stars were the very luckiest, promising luck, love, and beneficence to the birthday boy. Long rosewood tables lined the walls, piled high with all manner of fanciful culinary concoctions, and a spectacular bar, tended by Madam Rosmerta, who had jumped at the chance to come down from Hogsmeade for the occasion, was lined with multicolored drinks that smoked and steamed.

"It's beautiful," said Sirius, turning to Narcissa, who smiled at him. She was looking unusually lovely in lilac silk robes with a gorgeously beaded bodice. "And so are you."

Narcissa beamed -- like her son, she smiled rarely, and like her son, the rarity of her smiles made their laser-bright radiance all the more spectacular. "You don't look too bad yourself." She fingered the lapel of Sirius' elegant dark suit. "Kenneth Troll?"

"Armani for wizards. Narcissa -- I appreciate you doing all this for Harry. Especially when Draco didn't even want a party for himself."

Her smile turned a little sad. "I suppose this is still for him in a way,

even if I won't admit it. Maybe that's wrong of me--"

"No. If it makes Harry happy, Draco will be pleased. Although he'd rather be tortured to death by pixies than admit it."

"Ugh, don't mention pixies. Bad luck!" Narcissa swatted Sirius lightly on the arm, then turned as Anton, the ghostly butler, floated through a nearby wall. He wore a translucent flowered bowtie in honor of the occasion.

"The first guest has arrived, Madam," he announced.

The first guest turned out to be Charlie Weasley, looking handsome and pleased to be out of his work clothes for a change. He wore an elegant black suit against which his Weasley-red hair stood out startlingly. "I'm early, I know," he said, cheerfully, drew a gold-colored bottle out of his pocket, and handed it to Sirius. "Here, I brought something."

"A bottle of wine?" said Narcissa, her eyebrows arched.

"Giant wine," said Sirius, squinting at the label. "Good stuff, this -- half a glass'll knock you out, a full glass and you get your eyesight back in three months. Bit strong for young Harry, don't you think?"

Charlie shook his head. "That's for you, Sirius. I've got something else for Harry."

Charlie seemed so suddenly grave, Sirius' curiosity was piqued. "What did you get him?"

But Charlie refused to say a word on the subject, and Sirius soon ceased to press him on it as the guests started to arrive in earnest, and the anteroom began to fill up with friends, family, and even Snape, everyone there to celebrate Harry's seventeenth birthday.

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"Oh Draco, come on," said Ginny in a wheedling voice. She grinned sideways at Harry, who was sitting next to her on the bed in Draco's

room. Harry was already dressed for the party, in black trousers and a dark green Calvin Klein Wizardwear shirt. He smelled pleasantly of aftershave and as usual, his hair tumbled untidily all over his head. She knew Hermione was still putting on the finishing touches in the other room -- she was as careful and methodical about her appearance as she was about any potion -- and she herself hadn't even begun to get dressed, a process which she was quite sure would take no less than several hours. When she walked into the Manor Ballroom, she wanted to create an impression. She wanted all eyes to turn towards her - and one pair of silver eyes in particular. "Draco! We won't laugh at you, I promise."

"I am NOT wearing this, and that is final," said Draco flatly. He was standing behind the floating Chinese silk screen that closed off his walk-in closet from the rest of the room, and all they could see were his feet, clad in black boots. "My mother must be mad."

"Runs in the family, I'm told," said Harry pleasantly.

Draco jerked the curtain back and glared at Harry. "Potter--"

Harry burst out laughing, and Ginny had to clap her hand over her mouth to prevent herself from following suit. Draco flushed, then glared. The outfit his mother had chosen for him was best left undescribed, although "white" and "frilly" and even "shiny" were certainly words that passed through Ginny's mind as she looked at him. Also....was that a peasant collar? Surely it couldn't be...and...were those rhinestones?

"It's a nightmare," said Draco. He looked horribly pained.

Harry wheezed with laughter. "You look like an albino penguin."

"I think he looks rather sexy," said Ginny loyally.

"Sure, he might look sexy," said Harry generously. "To another albino penguin. If it was a blind albino penguin and hadn't gotten any in years."

"That is enough out of your smart mouth, Potter," said Draco, and

stepped back behind the curtain. There was a brief flash of colorful sparks, and for a moment Ginny worried that the screen might catch on fire, which nearly made her succumb to another round of the giggles. Harry rolled his eyes. "I've had about enough of the fashion show, I'm going to go find Ron," he said, and made as if to get up, but Ginny reached up and pulled him back down onto the bed by his sleeve. For some reason she couldn't quite identify, the thought of being left alone with Draco made her nervous. "Wait," she said, and Harry flopped back down on the bed, mussing his hair further.

When he stepped out again, Ginny lost all her urge to laugh. He wore charcoal gray trousers that looked as if they'd been designed especially for him, and a soft white shirt that brought out the blue undercurrents in his eyes. His shoes were dark brown leather, the kind that looked as if they probably cost 100 galleons a shoelace. He looked a little older, a great deal more elegant, and very, very rich. It was a bit intimidating.

He looked at Ginny and smiled. His hair had gotten long enough to curl down nearly to his collar, and against his tanned skin the faint scar along his cheekbone stood out as white-silver as his hair. She remembered touching it with her thumb while they were kissing in the room back at Slytherin's castle. Suddenly she wished she'd let Harry go away after all.

"I said," Draco raised an eyebrow, and from the tone of his voice she could tell he was repeating his question, "is this better?"

Ginny nodded, lost for words.

"Somewhat less revolting," said Harry, which, in Harry-and-Draco-speak, was a compliment.

"I should go get dressed myself," said Ginny, afraid she was starting to blush. She rolled quickly off the bed and went to the door, which opened before she reached it. Hermione was standing there, radiantly pretty in dark brown satin, her hair pulled back neatly and her face framed by a cascade of curls. Hermione so very rarely fussed with her appearance that Ginny often forgot how pretty she could look when she tried. Hermione's dark eyes went immediately

to Harry, who had sat up on the bed and was looking at her, looking a little stunned. "You look beautiful," he said.

Hermione said nothing, just turned pink. Harry got up off the bed and went over to her and kissed her very gently on the cheek, brushing back a stray tendril of her hair as he did so. Ginny felt a sharp and irrepressible stab of envy go through her when she saw the look on his face - not so much that it was Harry in particular, but a painful wishing that someone, some boy, would someday look at her like that, with that expression in his eyes.

She glanced at Draco, who was looking bored with his hands in his pockets. She wondered if he even could look at someone like that, with his heart in his eyes. Gray eyes were so much colder than green.

"May I point out that this is *my* bedroom," he said, eyeing Harry and Hermione's goggle-eyed display of affection icily. "If there are going to be snogs going on, either I should be involved in them or they should go on elsewhere. And since I'm none too interested in a threesome..."

Hermione turned pinker. "I just came to say that people are starting to arrive," she said primly. "Ginny, all your brothers are here -"

"Bill and Charlie too?" Ginny interrupted eagerly.

"Yes, and you'll never guess who Bill brought as his date - Fleur."

"She does get around," said Harry, sounding impressed.

"About 360 degrees," said Draco. "Didn't she date Bill before?"

Ginny looked at him sharply, trying to gauge by the tone of his voice whether or not he minded this new attachment of Fleur's. Whatever anyone might say, she still believed firmly that Fleur fancied Draco, from the top of his silvery head down to his famous ducky socks.

"She did," confirmed Hermione with a nod. "Percy and the twins are

here with their girlfriends, too. Charlie came on his own, though."

"That won't last," said Ginny with a grin. "Charlie's a girl magnet when he wants to be."

"Must be the leather trousers," said Harry, affecting a bland expression.

"Everybody out!" snapped Draco, whose patience for jokes about leather trousers had worn very thin. "I have to finish getting dressed. Bugger off, the lot of you."

Harry and Hermione vanished with a wave, and Ginny went to follow them. But a light touch on her arm made her pause. She turned and saw Draco looking down at her, a bright mischievous sparkle lighting his eyes. "Wait a second, Weasley," he said. "I want a word with you."

*Flip.* She felt her heart turn over in her chest, and mentally frowned at herself. It was just Draco - there was no point getting all worked up just because he touched her arm - well, all right, everyone got all worked up over Draco, which was even more reason that she shouldn't. It wasn't fair that he looked as good as he did, either, as if the clothes he wore had been made expressly for him. Oh, all right, they probably *had* been made expressly for him. Wasn't that what having a lot of money was all about? Of course no amount of money could buy hair like that, or eyes that color, or cheekbones you could cut paper with....that was just luck, or genetics, or some terribly unfair combination of the two...

Draco was waving something in front of her eyes. With a certain amount of difficulty, she focused on it. It was a small, red-bound book. In fact, it was the book she had given him the week before, for his birthday. *A Genealogy and History of the Hogwarts Founders*, by Fabianna Patters-Brown.

"Interesting gift," Draco said. "I wasn't sure why you gave it to me until I got to the bits about Benjamin Gryffindor - really a crashing bore, he was - and I kept coming across mentions of a certain

mysterious red-headed girl who kept appearing and disappearing in his camp. That wouldn't have been *you*, by any chance, on one of your oh-so-secret time travel missions? Back in time to find the perfect boyfriend?"

Ginny snorted inelegantly. "Ben? The perfect boyfriend?"

"Why not? Tall, dark, handsome, dead for a thousand years so he won't cramp your style, and just like all the rest of you Gryffindor types he walks around like he's got a ten-foot Giant pike stuck right up his -"

"Draco, this is pointless."

"I disagree. It's entirely pointy."

"Why?"

"Well," said Draco, sitting down on the edge of his bed, "it's occurred to me that there's a bit of a mystery about this Ben Gryffindor chap. He's got an Heir, right, but no wife, and no...attachments reported. No girls in his life really at all, just hangs about with his cousin Gareth --- nice-sounding fellow he was, too. But then there's this red-headed vixen who keeps popping in and out of young Benjamin's tent like she lives there...and how long were you there *really*?"

"Wait a minute. Are you asking me if I'm Harry's great-great-great *grandmother*?" Ginny demanded, too stunned to sputter.

"Well, if you put it like that..." Draco had the grace to look slightly abashed.

"How do you know," Ginny demanded, "that I'm not *your* great-great grandmother? Gareth was awfully cute, too."

Draco looked astonished. Ginny took a few seconds to savor the moment. It was not often that she was able to render Draco speechless. Finally, she laughed. "All right, fine," she admitted. "As



much fun as this has been...I´m *not* your great-grandmother. Or Harry´s. I never met Ben´s son, *or* whatever woman was his son´s mother, and as a matter of fact..." at which point she leaned in quite close and whispered something very softly into Draco´s right ear, something that made his eyebrows fly up like wings and his mouth quirk into a sly grin.

"You´re kidding," he said.

She shook her head. "I´m not."

"Well, well." He bounced up to his feet, the grin never leaving his lips. "The things you don´t learn in Professor Binns´ class." His eyebrows drew together. "And for that matter, there's something else I was wondering."

"What?"

"Well, I thought you got your bright idea about going back into the past because of the Gryffindor army that disappeared. But when Ben went back home, he took his army with him. Where did they all *go*?"

Ginny shook her head. "Oh, Draco...That's a long story, and I have to run...at this rate I´ll be half-dressed when the party starts."

Draco leaned back on his elbows. "I really see no problem with that."

Ginny cut her eyes sideways at him, and turned to go, but he held her back.

"Shall I walk you down the stairs?" he asked.

"What?"

"It´s tradition," he said. "Guests enter the ballroom in pairs and are announced at the foot of the stairs. It´s always been done that way. Harry will go down with Hermione, Sirius with my mother, Bill with

Fleur, and so on."

She just looked at him steadily, long past the point where any ordinary teenage boy would have started shifting from foot to foot. Draco just looked back at her, impassive, a small smile teasing the corner of his mouth, the long blue-gray eyes unreadable as always. It was odd, she thought, that he reminded her not so much of Gareth but of Ben, somehow - they had the same inner stillness, the same flickering expressions that came and went and left no mark behind, like wind across water.

"It's tradition," Draco said again.

"You said that already."

"Well, the essence of tradition is repetition."

"All right."

"What?"

"All right. I'll meet you at the top of the stairs in -"

"Fifteen minutes."

"I can't get beautiful in fifteen minutes!"

"You're already beautiful," he said calmly, leaning back against the headboard of his bed and flipping open the book. She looked at him quickly, hard, too see if he was lying - but of course, Draco didn't lie. What were the other things he'd said he didn't do? *I don't lie...or faint...and I don't dance.*

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," she said. "*If* you promise to dance."

Draco looked up. "With you, or just in general?"

"It would look a bit funny if you just danced with me."

"All right," said Draco offhandedly, returning his attention to the book. "I promise. I´ll dance."

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Surely it had been more than fifteen minutes, Ginny fretted, flitting about her room in a state of great agitation. She was, in general, ready --she had remembered a charm that smoothed her unruly locks into a velvety river of flame-colored silk, and had fastened it with clips in the shape of tiny multicolored butterflies. Her dress was perfect - blood-colored satin, with rows of black bows down the front and straps that crossed in back, showing her slim, freckled shoulders to great advantage. The problem? Her shoes. Search as she might, all over her borrowed bedroom, she could not find the ones that had come with her dress -- she must have left them in the library, along with her wand. The only other option was a pair of worn trainers - not really an option at all. She had no idea where she was supposed to get another pair of shoes at the eleventh hour like this. She wished, fervently, that she had the Time-Turner back again so that she could give herself an extra two hours to get ready - then smiled ruefully as she realized that that was exactly why Dumbledore had taken their Keys away in the first place. One was not supposed to use exceptionally old, exceptionally powerful magical tools for the express purpose of perfecting one´s outfit.

Ginny swore, and kicked at a bedpost with her bare foot.

"Not very ladylike," said a voice at the door.

It was Draco, of course. He had thrown an elegantly cut caramel-colored suede jacket on over his sweater, and looked, if possible, even more put-together than before. He was leaning against the doorframe, radiating ironic detachment and aloof confidence. Ginny looked at him with great dislike.

"Polite people knock," she said coldly.

"I'll keep that in mind in case I ever meet any." He held out a hand to her. "Aren't you ready? You look ready."

Ginny ignored his proffered hand, and pointed a bare toe at him accusingly. "You made me rush," she said irritably. "I forgot my shoes, and now I can't find them."

Draco grinned. It lit up his face.

"It's not funny," she snapped.

"On the contrary. But I won't debate the point. *Accio!*" he murmured under his breath, reaching out his left hand as he did so. A moment later, he caught something out of the air, and tossed it to her. Reflexively, she seized it, and stared --

"Ducky socks?" she said, looking down at them. Cotton, white with a print of yellow ducks, and a small hole in the left toe.

"They're clean," said Draco.

"They're *socks*," said Ginny. "With *ducks*."

"Put them on," said Draco, and so calmly did he say it that Ginny found herself sitting down on the bed, and drawing the socks onto her feet. No sooner were they on, then Draco waved his hand at them -- there was a bright sharp flash of light, and where the ducky socks had been, a pair of transparent crystal shoes, delicate and prismatic, sparkled on her feet.

Ginny looked from the sparkling shoes to Draco, and then back at her feet, and then back at Draco. Whose expression was unreadable. Whose whole personality was often as illegible as a book written in Parseltongue: a boy who could conjure up butterflies only to burn them to death, but thought nothing of sacrificing his own life for someone else's, whose clever tongue could flatter a friend or cut apart an enemy with equal deftness, who loved as fiercely as he hated, and hated as fiercely as he loved. A bundle of contradictions was Draco Malfoy, but then, so were most people...weren't they?

"Glass slippers," she said, finally. "Cute, if not original."

"I thought it was better to go with the old standards," said Draco.

"But they're really ducky socks," said Ginny.

"Nobody needs to know that," said Draco, "but you and me."

He held out his hand to her again, and this time, she took it.

\*\*\*

*"Harry Potter and Hermione Granger!"*

*"Rubeus Hagrid and Madame Olympe Maxime!"*

*"Arthur and Molly Weasley!"*

*"Bill Weasley and Fleur Delacour!"*

*"Remus Lupin and Heidi Howard!"*

*"Angelina Johnson and Fred Weasley!"*

*"George Weasley and ..... that is young mister Weasley isn't it?"*

Anton the ghostly butler, who had been having a delightful time bellowing out the name of each couple as they descended the floating marble staircase into the ballroom, stammered for a moment and paused. Not surprisingly, since George had taken advantage of his moment of limelight to show off the newest product of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes: Penguin Peppermints.

Jana, his pretty and long-suffering girlfriend, held her satin wrap well away from the beady-eyed pinniped squatting next to her on the stairs. "Why, George?" she wailed in a despairing tone. "*Why?*"

With a \*pop\* the penguin turned back into George, looking

immaculate in a Kenneth Troll black velvet suit. "I´m sorry, darling," he said repentantly. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Humph," said Jana, and flounced down the steps, trailing her celadon-green satin evening dress. George hurried after her.

At the top of the stairs, Honoria, Percy´ s fiancé, turned to him with a severe expression on her delicate features.

"Honestly, Percy. I cannot *bear* that brother of yours."

"Yes," agreed Percy, resplendent in pinstripe Armani trousers and suspenders. He looked as if he were attempting not to laugh. "Very trying, the twins are."

"*You* would never turn into a penguin at a public dinner party, would you?"

"Certainly not, dear. An otter, possibly. Never a penguin."

Whatever Honoria might have wanted to say in response was drowned out by Anton's bellow:

*"Percival Weasley and Honoria Glossop!"*

They descended, and joined Harry, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasley offspring at the bottom of the stairs. Bill and Fleur were holding hands; Angelina, stunning in a silver sheath dress, was watching as Fred gave Harry his birthday present. Harry opened the box and looked at the contents dubiously.

"More glasses?" he said, lifting a pair of spectacles out of the box. "Is this your way of telling me my specs are unflattering? Because I already knew that."

"Then why do you wear them?" Honoria asked, her petite nose in the air, as it often was. "Why not get yourself a new set? You could

certainly afford them."

"Because Hermione adores my old ones. Don't you, Hermione?"

"Passionately," said Hermione absently. She was staring across the room at Professor Lupin, who was looking rather uncomfortable with the date Narcissa had set him up with: her old school friend Heidi, an attractive but rather flashy-looking witch in backless gold robes. "Do you think Professor Lupin needs rescuing?"

Harry looked over and grinned. "Nah," he said heartlessly, as Heidi tried to convince Lupin to join a conga line forming at the far end of the room. Lupin, looking as if someone had fed him a wolfsbane quiche, shook his head. "It's good for him."

"Look," said Fred, waving a hand to get Harry's attention. "These aren't just any specs, Harry, these are Weasley's X-Ray Specs. You can use them to see through anything."

"Like Mad-Eye Moody's eye?" asked Ron, looking fascinated.

"Right," said George, and put them on. "For instance, at this very moment, I can see that Honoria is wearing leopard-print underwear."

Honoria looked appalled. "I am not!"

"Oh, yes you are," said George.

"Now, then," said Percy ineffectually.

"I am not!" Honoria repeated, turning sideways and appealing to Fleur. "I'm *not*!"

Fleur shrugged. "Zere is nothing wrong with leopard- print underwear," she said breezily. "I am wearing some myself."

"Argh," said Honoria, and flounced away, followed by Percy.

Harry looked suspiciously at George. "Do those things really work?"

George grinned. "*I think they work extremely well,*" he said.

Hermione giggled. Fleur squealed. It took everyone a moment to realize that she was squealing not at the twins' witticisms, but at a girl who had just joined their party. She was a small, dark-haired, very pretty girl in long white robes embroidered all over with tiny bluebirds and starlings.

"Monique!" Fleur exclaimed, seized the girl, and kissed her on both cheeks. Then she turned to the rest of the group with a smile, "Zis is my cousin, Monique. Monique, you know Bill, and zis is 'Arry Potter of course, and Ron Weasley, and -"

"Could I see your scar?" Monique said, so suddenly that everyone jumped, and looked at Harry.

"Erm..." Harry began. And paused. Because she wasn't looking at him; she was looking at Ron, and rather expectantly at that.

Ron looked utterly alarmed. "What?"

Monique pointed at his hand. "Your scar," she said. "Can I see it?"

Very slowly, Ron held out his right hand. It was certainly an impressive scar, despite having healed very quickly. All along the palm of his hand the pattern of Slytherin's sword hilt had been burned: a carved serpent ran between his wrist and the tip of his thumb, backed by the faint imprint of a circle.

"Ooooooh," said Monique, taking his hand. "I 'ave never seen anything like that. Fleur told me all about 'ow brave you were, picking up Slytherin's sword like that. You practically defeated a dementor all by yourself!"

"Well, I, er," said Ron, who was pink around the ears, "I mean, I didn't -"



Harry stepped firmly on his foot.

"There were three dementors, actually," Ron finished weakly.

Monique's huge blue eyes widened. "Dance with me," she breathed, and whisked Ron away with such rapidity and force that one was left to wonder if she had used an *Accio Ron!* spell without anyone noticing.

Hermione stared after them, looking shocked. "Well, really," she said, sounding just a shade indignant, as Monique cooed up to Ron on the dance floor. "I can't believe he'd fall for her act."

"Which act?" grinned Angelina. "The showing up wearing a low-cut dress and behaving as if he's the most wonderful thing in the world act? Because you'd be shocked how many guys would fall for that."

"I resent that broad generalization," said Fred, appearing, then paused and whistled. He was looking up at the top of the stairs, and the rest of them followed his gaze just as Anton bellowed out,

*"Charlie Weasley and Rhysenn Malfoy!"*

Hermione blinked in surprise. Charlie Weasley, broad-shouldered and handsome in a neatly cut black dinner jacket, was coming down the stairs with an unfamiliar young woman on his arm: a black-haired beauty in a scarlet dress, who hugged his side so tightly that he almost seemed to be wearing her like a bracelet. No sooner had they reached the foot of the stairs than the girl had planted a kiss on Charlie's cheek, and disappeared into the crowd.

"Who was that, older brother?" George demanded as Charlie ambled over to them, eyebrows raised. "She was really -"

Jana elbowed him in the ribs.

"..Not somebody I've ever seen before," George finished somewhat lamely.

"No more so have I," said Charlie with a shrug. "She grabbed me at the top of the stairs and begged me to walk her down. Anyway, I was afraid if I didn't, I'd end up walking down with Snape. He was standing just behind us and he didn't have a partner either."

"She probably didn't have an invitation," said Hermione, looking after the girl, but unable to locate her in the crowd.

"She said she was a Malfoy," said Charlie. "She *looks* like a Malfoy."

"Doesn't mean she's invited," said Hermione, who knew how convoluted and expansive the Malfoy family connections were.

"It's done now," said Charlie in a tone that indicated that this line of conversation held little interest for him. He turned away from Hermione, towards Harry, and said something quietly to him. Harry nodded, looking surprised, then leaned over to Hermione and kissed her a bit clumsily on the ear, "I've got to talk to Charlie. I'll be right back."

Hermione nodded, and glanced after him as he followed Charlie a little ways away. She saw with a jolt of shock at the base of her stomach that Harry and Charlie's heads were on the same level now. Harry was as tall as Charlie? When had that happened? A faint cold feeling began in her stomach. Some part of her wanted to think of herself and Harry as children, wanted to keep him as a child, as if that would keep him safe, safe from the forces that had taken Harry's father's life when he was only five years older than Harry was now.

Her eyes slid past Harry to Ron, entwined on the dance floor with Fleur's part-veela cousin. Oh *dear*. She looked hastily back at the twins, both of whom were staring back at the grand staircase with peculiar expressions. So, for that matter, were Angelina and Jana. Hermione followed their gazes just as Anton bellowed out:

"*Virginia Weasley and Draco Malfoy!*"

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"I'm glad you decided to come to the party, Charlie."

Harry held out his hand for Charlie to shake, and Charlie took it. It was a very, almost oddly, adult gesture on Harry's part, and Charlie felt something smart at the back of his eyes as he looked at the boy in front of him. He remembered the first time he had seen Harry -- small, pale, and almost lost in his black robes, staring anxiously at a pen full of dragons with Hagrid at his side. Charlie remembered thinking how brave a little kid he seemed, how stubborn, and how brightly his green eyes burned behind his glasses. He could almost forgive him for the way Professor McGonagall had famously evaluated Harry's capabilities upon first seeing him fly: *Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it!*

Hmmph. Well, what did she know?

Charlie gave Harry's hand a firm shake, and released it. "Happy Birthday, Harry," he said.

Harry smiled. "Thanks." He looked collected, relaxed and handsome, the dark green of his sweater bringing out the color in his eyes.

"I almost didn't come." Charlie reached into his pocket. "But I wanted to give you your birthday gift."

Harry looked surprised. "Hey, Charlie, you didn't have to -- I mean, after everything you've done for us - I don't know how much dragon-keeping pays, but --"

"Hang on there, Harry. I didn't exactly spend much money on it. In fact, I didn't spend any money on it. It's a bit of an odd story, but I had to...have you got a moment?"

Harry nodded, curious. "Sure."

Charlie took a deep breath, not taking his hand out of his pocket. "You know how close the dragon camp is, or was, to Slytherin's

castle," he said. "Which isn't surprising, considering that Slytherin's heirs kept dragons, so it was natural there'd be a lot of them in the area. Anyway. I know you were there the night the castle vanished - disappeared without a trace, didn't it?"

Harry nodded. "Nothing left - just a sort of round, flat, grassy area and a few stones."

"Yes," said Charlie. "Well, about a week after what - what happened to you all, I saw some odd lights in the sky over the forest, so I took a dragon out and went to investigate."

"You rode a dragon to the place where the castle was?"

Charlie nodded.

"And was there something there?"

"There wasn't *something* there," said Charlie edgily. "But there was *someone* there."

Harry's eyebrows rocketed up, and his question came out on an explosion of breath, "*Who?*"

"I don't know," said Charlie, a bit miserably. "A man, I think. Tall, wearing a long hooded robe and gloves; he might have had an Obscurus charm over his face, because I couldn't make out his features. He'd been sending up green flares with his wand into the sky, but when I arrived, he stopped and greeted me civilly. Called me 'Dragonrider.' He asked me if I thought I was a brave man."

"And you said...?"

"I said I tried to be one. So he reached into his robes and he brought out *this*, and he handed it to me." Charlie drew his hand out of his pocket at last, and with it, the object he had been holding. "He said, 'Dragonrider, take this to the Heir of Gryffindor, the One who Lived. It will keep him safe when all else fails, when charms and spells prove useless, and his Magid powers have forsaken him. Give it to

him, if you value his life.´ "

"Bloody Hell," said Harry, and stared at the thing in Charlie´ s hand. It was a rough sort of circle, made of a dark scarlet-black material that glowed like ruby syrup shot through with charcoal. It looked like glass, but when Harry took it in his hand he found it was much heavier and denser than glass, and more flexible, like a thin steel cable. It looked well-used -- there were scratches all around the rim. "What the hell is this?"

"No idea," said Charlie, miserable. "And I had a time, I can tell you, trying to decide whether to give it to you or not. I thought it might be something dangerous, something from You-Know-Who. I mean, bloody hooded men popping up in the dead of night, handing things over, then vanishing again. It doesn´ t inspire trust. But what he said - I was afraid to take the chance of *not* giving it to you." He shrugged. "So I decided to make it your choice. You´ re old enough, Harry."

Harry looked up at him, his green eyes steady. "Thanks, Charlie."

"It´ s not much of a present," said Charlie, with a regretful smile.

"No," said Harry, closing his hand around the scarlet circle, "I meant thanks for trusting me and treating me like an adult."

"Oh," said Charlie, a cold misgiving coalescing in his stomach, "of course, Harry. Of course."

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A peculiar feeling began in Hermione's stomach as she watched Draco and Ginny descending the staircase. She couldn't help but notice that they were holding hands. Ginny's face was tipped up to Draco's; Draco was looking straight ahead, but smiling. They both looked gorgeous, beautifully dressed, and as if they had been born to walk down elegant marble staircases in gigantic ancestral homes in front of crowds of admiring people. Which in Draco's case was true, but Ginny --

"Gin looks all right, doesn't she," said George, with older-brother pride in his voice.

Ginny did indeed look all right, Hermione thought. As Hermione had predicted, the deep red color she wore suited Ginny perfectly, bringing out the shimmering highlights in her scarlet hair. The delicate bodice of the dress emphasized her narrow waist and high shoulders. She looked almost fragile, although the sparkle in her eyes recollected the fierce young woman who had ridden a dragon to save Draco and Ron from the top of Slytherin's tower.

"She looks great. Aside from that big ugly thing stuck to her arm," said Fred cheerfully.

Percy blinked. "Ah. You mean Malfoy." He smiled, and pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. "He's getting nearly as famous as Harry, these days, isn't he? *Teen Witch Weekly* was running some sort of contest the other day -- first prize was a photo of Draco."

"Second prize," said George, "was two photos of Draco."

"Now be nice," said Honoria, and extended her hand as Draco and Ginny reached the bottom of the stairs and joined their group. "Ginny -- lovely to see you. Draco Malfoy -- you probably don't remember me, but --"

"Honoria Glossop," said Draco, looking at her thoughtfully, "Ravenclaw. You were a seventh year when I was in third. Your family are the Dorchester Glossops, aren't they? Totleigh Towers?"

Honoria nodded, quite pink with pleasure. "You have a remarkable memory."

The rest of the group proved less easy to charm. Angelina, recollecting Draco from many a bitter Quidditch match, looked at him as if he were something stuck to a fly swatter, Jana looked nervous, and Fred and George looked churlish. Hermione felt herself unable to say anything, as feelings of confusion prevented her from speaking. She wished Harry were there, but he had vanished to

speak with Charlie. It seemed aeons that they stood there making small talk before Harry and Charlie returned. They were accompanied now by two other guests - Viktor Krum, and a tall, unfamiliar, dark-haired man with bright blue eyes, who Charlie introduced as Aiden Lynch.

"You used to be Seeker for Ireland!" Angelina exclaimed, recognizing him immediately.

"Still am," said Lynch in a pleasantly accented voice. "Took a year off. But I'm back now."

"And we can all rest easy," said Draco, a slight bite to his voice. Hermione glanced sideways at him. She could tell that the toll of spending this much time in the company of Weasleys who disliked him was beginning to show. When Draco was under stress, he was sarcastic. He was looking sideways, over at Harry, but Harry, for whatever reason, was ignoring him and talking to Charlie.

"I saw you've got a Quidditch pitch outside," said Aidan to Draco, still pleasantly. "We should have a game tomorrow. Viktor and I, we're staying in town, and--"

"What, you and Viktor against me and Harry? The four of us?" said Draco. "An all-Seekers game? Oh that'll be a blast, just hanging about for eternity waiting for the Snitch to show up."

"Draco," Ginny reprimanded him. "Don't be unpleasant."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "And don't tell me what to do, Weasley."

Harry looked over, his attention caught at last. "I think it sounds relaxing," he said, with a slow half-smile. "An all-Seekers game, I mean."

Draco said nothing.

Hermione bit her lip. Ginny looked tense and annoyed. Draco looked tense and annoyed. Some small part of her was pleased about this, and this made her feel terrible. She looked over at Harry,

who smiled at her, and that made her feel worse.

It was Aidan who broke the silence, with a rather astonishing request. He held out a hand to Ginny, and with a smile that lit his blue eyes, asked, "Would you like to dance?"

Ginny stared at him, then at Draco. He looked at her with the blank expression that Hermione knew meant that he was very angry, and shrugged. Ginny turned back to Aidan with flaming cheeks.

"I'd love to," she said.

Aidan took her hand and whirled her away into the mass of dancers. They nearly bumped into Ron and the French girl, who were snogging in a manner that Hermione felt should not be legal in England. Aidan was an excellent dancer, Hermione had time to note, before the pair disappeared from sight among the crowd.

Harry looked over at Draco, and raised an eyebrow.

"Shut up, Potter," said Draco, without moving. He was standing with his arms crossed and looking very annoyed indeed.

Harry grinned. "What're you going to do, then, Malfoy?"

Draco slowly uncrossed his arms. "I promised Ginny I'd dance," he said. "I'm going to dance." He turned around and looked at Angelina, who was standing close by.

She shook her head. "I am NOT dancing with you," she said. "I'd rather eat a Bludger."

"Fine, then," said Draco, and held out a hand to Jana. She looked blank for a moment, emitted a small stunned squeak -- then, without a moment's further hesitation, seized Draco's hand and followed him out onto the floor.

"Jana!" protested George, looking aghast as his girlfriend and Draco vanished into the crowd.



Harry grinned. "Better buy yourself a pair of leather trousers, George," he said. "You've got competition."

George looked irritable. "She's just annoyed about the penguin thing."

"Or maybe all those *Teen Witch Weekly* articles turned her head," said Fred. "She does have a subscription, you know."

"Bugger," said George.

Harry took Hermione's hand. He was no longer smiling, but his green eyes were dancing brightly. "Let's dance."

"But you hate dancing, Harry."

"True, but I want to see what happens. Don't you?"

Hermione let herself grin. "You know I do," she said, and threw her arms around his neck as they waltzed out onto the floor.

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And as he had promised Ginny he would, Draco danced. He danced with Jana, holding her lightly around the waist, until George showed up and cut in with a murderous glare, he danced with Pansy Parkinson, whose hair was done up in enormous curls that threatened to put out his eye every time she turned; he danced with Blaise Zabini, who with her long sloe-green eyes was probably the prettiest girl in Slytherin; he did not, however, dance with Ginny. She seemed completely wrapped up in Aidan Lynch, and danced every dance with him. Draco was conscious of a growing sense of irritation that it was becoming harder to fight down. To distract himself, he danced with Fleur, who looked stunning in almost-sheer white robes. The Dark Mark had disappeared from her arm as it had from his own, and the color was back in her face.

"You back together with Bill?" he asked, as she executed a slow turn.

Fleur chose not to answer this. "You know, you still owe me a favor,"

she said, her tone as airy as her dress robes.

Draco shook his head. Fleur was impossible. "I suppose you want me to make mad, passionate love to you right here on the dance floor?"

She widened her indigo eyes. "Not at all. I was 'oping you might buy me a 'ouse."

"A 'ouse - a *house*?"

"In the south of France, I think."

"Fleur! Get over this! It was not that big of a favor!"

"It doesn't 'ave to be that big of a 'ouse," she said reasonably.

Conversations with Fleur always made Draco feel as if he were running very fast in a very small circle and getting nowhere. As soon as the song ended, he excused himself and went over to the drinks table, where a green-skinned dryad maid in a white apron was mixing up some interesting-looking cocktails that smoked and steamed. He'd just selected a Mai Tai and was taking a long drink of it when he heard a voice behind him, "No green umbrella this time?"

It was Hermione. He raised an eyebrow. "Who told you about that?"

"Ginny, who else?" said Hermione, eminently practical. She sighed then, and brushed an errant brown curl off her face.

"Where's Harry?" said Draco.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Dancing with Cho."

"Hostile takeover?"

"No, I think she means well," said Hermione, and shrugged.

"Anyway, I'm sure he'll get away as soon as he can. Draco -- I wanted to tell you something."

"What?"

In answer, she cocked her finger like a pistol, and poked it hard into his clavicle. "Ginny-does-not-like-Aidan-Lynch," she said, enunciating each word clearly. "She is trying to annoy you. You are a very jealous person even if you don't like to admit it, and she is a very stubborn person, and for goodness' sake just go ask her to dance, or we will all gang up on you and dye your hair bright yellow, and you will have to start seventh year looking like a daffodil and you won't like that."

Draco cocked his head. "Creative," he said.

"Shut up, Malfoy."

"Ginny and I don't get along together," said Draco.

"You get along worse apart," said Hermione. She reached up and patted his cheek, and he saw the momentary flash of darkness in her eyes that meant that this wasn't easy for her, either. "Just go and do it," she said, and walked away.

Draco turned around, and found himself facing Ginny and Aidan, who were swaying in time to the music. This was probably not coincidental, he mused, and probably why Hermione had made herself scarce. He stood for a moment, shoring up his confidence. It didn't take long-- there was that to be said for being naturally arrogant.

He stepped forward, and tapped Aidan on the shoulder. "I'd like," he said evenly, "to cut in."

Aidan looked surprised. Ginny looked even more surprised. She did not, however, look displeased. Draco ignored whatever it was that Aidan muttered as he relinquished his place, stepping forward and putting his own arms around Ginny, resting his hands neatly on her waist, feeling the warmth of her against his chest. He looked down into her face, which was flushed from dancing, her eyes alight. Her hair, the color of firelight seen through a glass of red wine, spilled down over her shoulders, threaded through with strands of reflected gold. She had never looked prettier. Even if it didn't work

out with Ginny, he mused, he had a feeling he was at risk of developing a lifelong partiality for redheads.

After a long pause, she smiled at him. "I saw you dancing."

"Yes. Thank you for bringing that up."

"I don't see why it bothers you so much. You dance well - really well. Look at Harry - he kept landing on Hermione's feet."

"Hermione," said Draco, "would not mind if Harry stood on her feet all evening."

"And would you mind," she said against his ear, "if I stood on your feet all evening?"

"I'm afraid not," he said.

Ginny's mouth widened into a smile; he felt it against his neck. "And why is that?"

"It's the red hair," said Draco. "I seem to be defenseless against it."

"I think Ron's available for dancing," Ginny said. "If red hair is what you're after."

"I'm afraid Ron's gone off with that French tart," replied Draco equably. "You'll have to do."

Ginny pulled back a little, looking up into his face with her eyes wide and luminous with mischief. They had stopped dancing now, and he felt that heat, that thickening in his blood that always seemed to happen when she looked at him like this. "I'll have to do *what?*" she said.

"This," said Draco, and bent to kiss her.

But his lips only just brushed hers, sending a shower of sparks through his nerves, when a hand reached out and tapped Draco firmly on the shoulder. Pulling back, he straightened up and whirled

around, ready to snap at the interloper, whoever he might be.

But it was a she. Before him stood a slender young woman with long black hair that spilled over her bare shoulders and the extremely low-cut bodice of her ruby-red gown. It was gathered at her narrow waist with a thick gold chain that rode low over her hips, each link of which was a tiny golden poppy holding a ruby in its center. "Hallo, Draco," she said. "Do you remember me?"

Draco goggled at her. He wanted to snap at her, but there was something about her demeanor that held him back. She looked oddly familiar, and yet he couldn't place her at all. "Who are you?" he demanded, knowing he sounded impolite, but then it had been rather impolite of this witch to interrupt an obviously private moment.

"I'm Rhysenn Malfoy," she said, a smile teasing the corner of her red-painted mouth. "Your cousin."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "You're from the Singapore branch of the family, aren't you," he said, recalling that the gold-and-ruby poppies had been the symbol adopted by those Malfoys who had moved east into Singapore in the 1800's to make a killing by exporting illegal Chinese Fireball dragon's blood.

"You do remember me," she breathed. "Would you like to dance?"

Draco felt Ginny tense in his arms. "I'm already committed for this dance," he said. "As should be obvious."

Rhysenn's smile widened. "Oh no," she said, and held out a slender hand. "I don't think you are."

For a moment he simply looked at her in surprise. Then his gaze moved to her outstretched hand, and he stiffened.

On the fourth finger of her right hand she wore a signet ring in the shape of a griffin. The signet was the griffin's back, on which an M was engraved, wound round with tiny serpents. The griffin's wings

made the band of the ring, which was carved entirely out of a single piece of onyx. He knew the ring; it had been his father's. His father had been wearing it the day that he died.

The breath went out of Draco in a whooshing gasp; he was unconscious of his hand going slack in Ginny's, or her startled eyes on his face.

"Dance with me," said Rhysenn, and her eyes held a warning.

For a long moment, he hesitated. Then, recollecting himself, he turned back to Ginny. "Gin, I -"

Without letting him finish, Ginny whipped her hands out of his with a snap. "It's fine," she said tightly. "Aidan will be wondering where I am, anyway."

She flounced off. Draco looked after her in mingled disappointment and annoyance. *Why* did she always fly off the handle and think the worst of him immediately? Did explanations count for nothing?

Feeling rebellious, he took Rhysenn's hand. Her slender fingers closed tightly around his and he could feel the imprint of her sharp nails on his skin. "Let's dance," he said.

He let her lead him out onto the dance floor, where she immediately threw her arms around him and yanked him against her, pressing their bodies so tightly together he would have been astonished if a sliver of light had been able to penetrate the nearly nonexistent distance between them. She was wearing a very sweet, very heavy perfume that made him think of jasmine and sandalwood and created a slight dizziness behind his eyes. He tried to focus on her face, which was a bit difficult given his lightheadedness. With her black hair and red lips she looked a little like a banshee, but her gray eyes were pure Malfoy.

She tilted her head back and let her red lips brush his ear. "Draco," she whispered. "Are you ready to hear what I have to tell you?"

He tried to pull back, but she clung on like a limpet. "That depends on what it is."

She pouted a little. "You´re no fun," she complained. "Where´s the famous Draco Malfoy charm I´ve heard so much about?"

"I´ve generally found it necessary to tone it down at crowded events," said Draco dryly. "It can be dangerous."

"To women especially, I imagine."

"Yes. Occasionally they injure themselves in their frenzy to disrobe."

"Like that little redhead you were kissing?"

Draco stopped dead in the middle of a dance step, and tightened his grip on her hands. She winced, but kept smiling. "I think it´s time you told me what you came here to tell me," he said tightly. "You talk, or I leave."

She tossed her hair back. "It´s a message," she said. "You might not like it."

He raised his eyebrows. "Not another of those death threat things," he said lightly. "Harry and I seem to have been getting a lot of those lately. 'Die, die, spawn of evil,' all that sort of thing, it's really very boring."

"No," she smiled. "This is a message you *need* to receive."

Draco began to pull away politely. "I don't think so-"

"The message," she purred, "is hidden inside my bodice, if you'd care to try to find it."

Draco looked at her sideways. Her bodice was so tight, he couldn't imagine how she could fit so much as a tissue in there, much less a substantial piece of parchment.

"I know I have a reputation," he said. "But I do not grope strange women on public dance floors, even if they are related to me. Especially if they are related to me, in fact."

She smiled coolly, and reached for his hand. A moment later, he felt something cold, hard and round pressed into his palm. She closed his fingers around it; he knew without looking that it was the signet ring. "Your father," she said, "wanted you to have that."

"What is this?" He was astonished at the coldness in his own tone. "What are you playing at, Rhysenn?"

"I can't tell you," she said. "I must give you the written message. Those were my instructions."

"Instructions from *who*?"

In answer, she only smiled, and tugged at his closed fist. He let her lead him into the shadow of a curtained alcove. She pushed him into it and then followed, dragging the curtain shut behind them. In the shadowy half-light, she smirked up at him, let go of his hands, and reached down to start unlacing the front of her tight, poppy-embroidered bodice.

Draco took an involuntary step back, although he didn't take his eyes off her. (He was, after all, seventeen.) "What are you doing?"

She smiled again and tossed her hair so that it ran down her back like a river of black ink. She inhaled, which, given the state of her clothes, was impressive. "Giving you room," she said. "The message. Come and find it."

And he did.

Anyone passing by the alcove, curtained off though it was, would have heard the sound of a slight scuffle, much giggling and a somewhat out-of-breath-sounding Draco saying, "Wouldn't it have been easier on you just to jump out of the birthday cake stark naked, if this was what you were after?"

"So naff," replied Rhysenn, amused. "I like to do things my way. Anyway, don't look at me. I'm just the delivery service."



Draco's voice was razor-wire sharp. "Something gives me the feeling you *don't* work for The Ministry's Official Owl Post Service. Or is this something only the premium customers get?" He drew in his breath then. "Ah," he said a bit weakly. "Never mind."

A few moments later, the tapestry was drawn aside, and a pleased-looking Rhysenn Malfoy exited the alcove, followed by a very flushed and disarrayed Draco, who was clutching a roll of parchment in his left hand. With a wink and a pout, she vanished into the crowd. Draco stared after her for a moment, then turned and walked quickly towards the wide marble staircase at the far end of the hall. He took the stairs two at a time, strode down the long second-floor hallway to the library, and bolted himself inside.

A fire was burning in the grate, sparkling bright blue and purple in honor of the party. There was no other light in the room except the cold moonlight that came through the high arched windows, throwing milky patches against the floor. The cherrywood desk that had been his father's, piled high now with giftwrapped presents for Harry, loomed ghostlike in the corner. With a slight shiver of unpleasant premonition, Draco crossed the room to the fireplace, unrolled the parchment he was holding, and began to read. It was a letter, and it was addressed to him.

*Draco,*

*That was a very amusing show you put on last night, ranting and raving at my gravesite. (At this, the paper shook violently in Draco's hands.) Most of what you said was ridiculous adolescent posturing, but I would agree with you on one point -- I am not God, nor have I ever pretended to be. And unlike God, I have no plans to give over my only son to the rabble -- the Potters and the Blacks and the Weasleys and the rest of the trash of this world. You belong to me, Draco, you always have, and to that dark power under whose auspices we both are bound. You know of whom I speak. He sends his thanks to you for ridding the world of the only wizard who could have stood against him and his rise. I myself confess I had my doubts that you were capable, but his faith in you never faltered.*

*Whatever powers he gifted you with in your childhood when he passed on his Heir of Slytherin status to you, they are beyond anything even I might have imagined. Your rebellious nature troubles me, but he assures me that can be curbed given the right ... incentives. In any case, for the first time, you have made me proud of you. I enclose our family signet ring as a token that I consider you at last a real Malfoy; wear it, and wait for word from me. I shall come to you on your true birthday. Expect me. Know that I am watching you. And that I am, as always,*

*Your father,*

*Lucius Nero Malfoy*

As soon as his eyes had scanned his father's sprawling signature, the paper burst into ashes in Draco's shaking hands, sifting away through his fingers, leaving behind only what he had been clutching in his fist - the signet ring, which caught the light of the fire and glimmered in the darkness like a live black coal.

*My father, he thought. My father ... is alive.*

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Harry stood in the shadows beside a tapestry and looked down at his wrist. He had extricated himself from Cho, only to be swept up by Lavender and then Parvati. He was glad to see them all, but generally felt secure when dancing only with Hermione, who knew what a dreadful dancer he was and did not mind. There was also something else troubling him -- the band Charlie had given him, which rested awkwardly around his wrist. He noticed that as he danced, moving between the close-packed dancers on the floor, the band would change temperature, becoming blazingly hot one moment, scaldingly cold the next. He looked down at his wrist, chafed red and raw now, and wondered what the hell it meant.

"That is an expensive-looking piece of jewelry," said a soft voice in Harry's ear.

He turned to see the girl who had come down the stairs with Charlie earlier standing at his shoulder, smiling at him. He had not heard her approach. Up close, she was clearly a Malfoy, with the long upswept bones of cheek and chin and jaw, and steady gray eyes. Those eyes were fixed firmly on the band around his wrist.

"Some thief will have your hand," she said, "to get that from you."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. Something about her set his teeth on edge. She was not natural. "I don't see where it's any of your business."

"I suppose you don't mind," she smiled. "You wear it on your left wrist. Should you lose that, you still have your right hand to do your magic with. And to catch the Snitch with, of course."

"I don't recall," Harry said coolly, "asking *you* for any advice."

"It's not jewelry, you know," she said, and smiled. "It's not a bracelet. It's a runic band. But perhaps you would be better off to treat it like jewelry and to let a thief steal it."

Harry felt a prickle of cold run along his spine, and shook his head to clear it. "What makes you say that?"

"I can read runic lettering," she said, looking down at the band. Harry followed her gaze to it, seeing again the marks along the band that had looked like scratches to him. "Can you?"

Harry shook his head slowly. A cold feeling of mistrust was spreading up his spine, spearing the base of his skull. "No. But my girlfriend can."

"Can she?" The girl put a long cool hand against his cheek and turned his face toward her. There was no desire in her touch, no lust; rather Harry felt as if with her gaze she was somehow turning him inside out, examining the contents of his brain. "Then she can

tell you that that rune augurs betrayal," she said. "Those who you think you can trust, you cannot trust. Those to whom you will go to seek advice will offer you false counsel. Your enemies will find you out, and your friends will arrive too late to give you aid."

"Is that your prediction?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice light, although his heart was pounding.

"It's a certainty," said the girl, her long eyes unreadable.

"And is there anything I can do to avoid this outcome?"

"Probably not." She pointed a long finger at the band around his wrist. "But if I were you, I would thread that like an extra buckle on my belt, not wear it so obviously on my wrist, inviting trouble. If you are determined to keep it, that is."

"I'm determined," said Harry.

"Yes," said the girl. "Yes, you are, aren't you."

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Hermione found Harry standing alone against a wall of the ballroom, looking extraordinarily serious. Despite the fact that it was his birthday and his party, he seemed to be standing far apart from the rest of the crowd, so far sunk into thought she felt it might take a fishing line to retrieve him.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and he jumped. "Hermione!"

"Did I startle you?"

"Yes - just a little."

"What were you thinking about?"

His eyes seemed to slide into focus as they studied her face, the green deepening to nearly black. "Nothing. Do you want to go somewhere? Talk, maybe?"

"Yes." Hermione jumped at the chance to be alone with him. "We could walk on the balcony."

They left without anyone noticing, through the French doors that were partly concealed by a pillar wreathed in fairy lights. Outside, the cool air struck Hermione's face and bare shoulders, making her shiver, although the night was fairly warm. Moonlight spilled over the pale stones of the balcony, lighting the garden and the empty gazebo wreathed in white lanterns, striking cool sparks from the rims of Harry's glasses.

Hermione took his hand. "Over here."

She led him into the shadow of an archway, against the high wall of the Manor. He looked at her inquiringly.

"I wanted to give you your birthday present," she said.

"I thought we were meant to be doing presents at midnight," replied Harry, mildly curious.

"I wanted to give you this present in private," Hermione said.

Harry's eyebrows went up. "Does it involve exotic dancing and chocolate syrup?"

"No," said Hermione firmly. "For that you'll have to wait until Christmas."

Harry grinned. Taking a deep breath, Hermione retrieved the small box she had so carefully wrapped from a pocket of her dress, and handed it to Harry. She watched as he took the box from her and tore away the wrapping, his quick and clever hands flicking the catch aside and snapping the box open as deftly as he often caught the Snitch. She held her breath, watching him -- his dark green eyes widening behind his glasses, the uncertain look on his face as he raised those same eyes to her -- and her heart skipped a beat, as it always did when he looked at her so directly. Everything about Harry was direct, his gaze, his walk, his movements, his speech, the

way he loved her. He said, looking down at the box and then back up at her, "This looks -- expensive. Hermione, I --"

"It wasn't expensive," she said, raising her chin. She could see herself reflected in the dark circles of his pupils.

"It must have been. It's a beautiful watch," and Harry reached down and took the pocket watch uncertainly by its silver safety chain, and lifted it out of the box. The moonlight struck a point of cold fire along the rim of the watch's face. "I've needed a watch since fourth year, but I couldn't--"

"Turn it over, Harry," she said, and he did, and she watched his eyes widen as he looked at the inscription carved there.

"Sirius gave it to me," she said, her words spilling over each other in her haste and nervousness. "To give to you -- he said it was your father's, your mother gave it to him when he turned seventeen and it never left his wrist after that until the night he -- until Sirius found them, and he took it off your father's wrist but it was broken. He put it in the bike's saddlebag, and when Hagrid gave it back to him this year, he tried to get it to work right again, he took it all over Diagon Alley but no one could fix it, so he wasn't sure what to do with it, and he gave it to me to see if there was anything I could think of. I took it to London, to a Muggle watch repair shop, and they fixed it straightaway -- that's why the wizarding shops couldn't fix it -- they fixed it right off, and I had them put that inscription in under the original one -- Harry, I hope you don't mind --"

She trailed off at the look in his eyes, and very slowly he glanced down and read the inscriptions again, the one very old, worn and rubbed away a little, and the one below it brand new.

*For James, with love from Lily, your best friend.*

And underneath that:

*For Harry, with love from Hermione, your best friend.*

"I hope you don't mind," she said again, and Harry's eyes flew up, dark and a little incredulous.

"Mind?" he said, a faint ragged edge to his voice. Words seemed to fail him entirely then; he put his arms out, and she went into them with a feeling of relief, as if she were shedding a heavy burden. His hands stroked her back and she could hear them whisper against the satin of her dress, and then they were on her bare skin and she tilted back her head and reached up and took his glasses off so that he could kiss her, and he kissed her.

At first she was aware only of Harry's mouth on her mouth, his hands sliding down her sides to grasp her waist and pull her more firmly against him, the sweet taste of him and the steady uninterrupted pounding of his heart. Kissing Viktor, kissing Ron, had never felt right. Kissing Draco was like visiting some beautiful and distant country terrifying in its foreignness. Kissing Harry was coming home.

It was the music she heard first. Rising around them, piercing in its sweetness and distinctiveness, utterly beautiful: phoenix song. She pulled away from Harry, whispered against his lips, "*You hear that?*" and he nodded, and tightened his arms around her.

"Like the first time," she said, a little wonderingly, and looked up as something brushed her face. It wasn't snowing this time - instead, gazing up, she saw something she had never seen before or could have imagined: the stars, brilliant as diamonds, seemed, as she watched, to be detaching themselves from the black velvet of the night sky and fluttering downward, surrounding her and Harry in a cage of sparkling lights. She knew it was an optical illusion, just as the snow had not been real snow, but it was nevertheless heartbreakingly beautiful. The stars, each the size of a fingernail and a brilliant silver-gold, piled themselves at her feet, lit on her shoulders, tangled themselves in Harry's night-black hair. She looked at him, his eyes like green jade, following her own gaze upward.

"How do you do that, Harry?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "I don't know. It's just what I feel."

He looked younger without his glasses; more handsome, but less familiar. She held them out to him. "Can you see properly?" she said in a voice that shook a little. "It's beautiful."

He smiled then. "I can see you," he said. "That's all I need to see," and he took her hand again and pulled her against him, and this time she abandoned herself completely to kissing and being kissed by Harry, and didn't even notice when the falling stars were replaced by hooting baby owls, colorfully wrapped candies, spinning catherine wheels, boxes of chocolate, and several pairs of pink fuzzy dice.

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Draco did not know how long he stood in front of the fading fire, silent and blind to everything around him. When he finally raised his eyes from the fireplace, golden diamonds of shock danced in front of his vision.

Lucius was alive. Not only was he alive; he was close by, he had seen Draco at his gravesite, had heard his angry and rebellious words and had probably been laughing to himself the whole time. Blindly, Draco crossed the room and leaned against the desk that had been his father's, where Sirius had sat earlier that day. Propped against the corner of the desk was the sword Sirius had given him for his birthday. He reached out and laid his hand lightly on the silvery pommel. The workmanship on the sword was slender and delicate and some of the finest he had ever seen: the blade was surprisingly strong and yet looked barely two millimeters thick; the sides of it were carved with a pattern of black roses, which were reproduced on the scabbard, complete with elaborate thorns. Along the hilt were enameled two words in Latin: *Terminus Est*. Hermione had told him that this meant *This Is The Line of Division*. It was an incredibly expensive and beautiful-looking thing and Sirius refused to tell him where he'd gotten it; he just shrugged, and smiled.



He let his hand trail down to the scabbard that Harry had given him. The scabbard that was supposed to prevent the spilling of his blood. And that it might do; but it would never protect him against his father. Nothing could.

A noise at the door snapped him out of his trance. He looked up, dazed, and saw his mother standing in the doorway, the firelight catching the colorful beading along the front of her gown. She was looking at him, her eyes filled with concern.

"Draco," she said. "You're missing the party. Are you all right?"

"I'm quite well, Mother," he said tonelessly, and, releasing his hold on the sword, followed her out of the room and down the stairs.

The party was in full sway, and he moved through it like someone in a dream. Faces, strange and familiar, loomed up out of the crowds, which had begun to remind him a little of the masses crowding the opposite side of the dark river in the afterworld. He paused here and there catching snatches of drifting conversation. Leaning against an alcove, drinks in hand, Sirius and Arthur Weasley were talking.

"Arthur, I never congratulated you on your appointment as Minister. It couldn't have gone to a more deserving man."

Arthur Weasley's voice was troubled as he replied. "I'm not so sure, Sirius. At first I was flattered, but lately it seems to me that many of the Ministry officials I've spoken to felt somehow afraid NOT to vote for me. It's almost the way it was back when --"

"Arthur, you're being paranoid."

"No, Sirius. I don't think I am. I was actually wondering if perhaps -- well, with your Auror training --"

Their voices faded as Draco moved on through the crowd. He passed Ginny, standing with her back to him beside Aidan Lynch, among a cluster of Weasleys, identifiable by their flame-bright hair. Ginny

turned as he passed, her bright curls brushing her cheek, and cut her dark eyes sideways towards him, but he didn't look back at her. He passed Fleur, looking ridiculously beautiful, her arm through Bill Weasley's arm as she chatted animatedly with Mad-Eye Moody, whose scarred face was pulled down into a sour scowl. He was gazing angrily over at the small karaoke stage that had been set up over by the canape table. where Severus Snape (who, Draco recalled from his brief stay with the professor, had a very pleasant baritone) was belting out his favorite songs with a quartet of house-elves for backup.

Moody growled. "If there's one thing I hate," he snarled, "it's a Death Eater who knows all the words to 'Brandy, You're A Fine Girl.' "

Fleur laughed; so did Bill, and Draco walked on past them without stopping. He passed Pansy Parkinson, dancing an awkward two-step with Ron, who looked irritable as she landed on his toes; there were Lavender and Parvati, giggling as usual; Hagrid, beaming and showing everyone he could buttonhole the photographs of his and Madam Maxime's young son, Rubeus Jr. He passed his mother in animated conversation with Molly Weasley, and then Dumbledore, who appeared to be engaged in trying to convince a slightly champagne-tipsy Charlie to take the position of Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts for the next year, since Hagrid was taking time to be with his family. Although he kept his eyes open for black hair and a swirl of scarlet skirts, Draco did not see Rhysenn Malfoy anywhere, a fact which dismayed but did not surprise him. After delivering such a message, he doubted there was much likelihood she'd stay around.

He came out of the thickest part of the crowd, and paused for a moment to catch his breath. He looked back at the laughing, shouting, (and it Snape's case, singing) throng, and it all suddenly seemed like too much -- the noise, the pressure of the people around him, his own exhaustion and the confusion buzzing in his head. He turned blindly and fumbled for the handle to the French doors behind him. They opened and he slipped through.

He found himself standing on the wide stone balcony that ran

around the outside of the Manor. Cold silvery moonlight spilled like a pile of coins over the cool flagstones, glittering on the moat water below. The evening was perfectly still, the silver-blue horizon motionless and steady, the silence unbroken --

Until he heard a sound. A laugh, punctuated by a soft and indrawn breath. He turned and saw two figures standing in a shadowed alcove: the two people, in fact, that he had been looking for. Harry and Hermione, standing so close together there was almost no light visible between them, their hands interlinked, her face raised up to his. The moonlight turned them to a study in contrasts, Harry's black hair and white skin, the outline of her hand against his cheek, her bare white shoulders rising out of the darkness of her dress, the shadowy curls that lay along her neck. He knew them as he would have known them anywhere, but in the dimness it was hard to tell where he ended and she began, whether they were man and woman or boy and girl together, whether they were real or ghosts. They could have been Harry's own parents. They could have been any two people in love.

Draco turned away, realizing as perhaps he should have known all along, that he couldn't go to them with this either -- not tonight, not on Harry's birthday, not when--

The touch of a hand on his shoulder almost made him jump out of his skin. Reflexively, his hand flew outward -- but his enchanted sword was, of course, gone. He turned quickly, and saw, standing before him with a serious look in his blue eyes, Albus Dumbledore.

"Mister Malfoy," said Dumbledore quietly. "I was wondering if I might have a moment of your time."

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Still in a haze, Draco followed Dumbledore down the hall and into the drawing-room, which was empty of other guests, and lit with a myriad of hovering colored lights. A faint fire sputtered in the grate. He could see himself in the mirror over the fireplace mantel: he looked tense, cold and tired. Over his shoulder, he could see the reflection of Dumbledore, standing behind him, looking remote and

a little severe, the usual twinkle gone from his eyes.

This wasn't the first time he had seen the Headmaster since the end of term. Dumbledore had come to the Manor a few days after Draco and Harry had returned, and had spoken with all of them - Harry and Draco, Sirius and Narcissa - separately and together. He knew as much as anyone could about the events that had transpired, down to the last details. He had even commented with some wry amusement that there were no discrepancies in the stories Draco and Harry told, none at all - "Usually, unless people have agreed on a story beforehand, some details differ in the remembrance. But not yours."

Harry had shrugged. "Maybe we just see things similarly."

Dumbledore had shaken his head. "No. I don't think that's it," he'd said, but had refused to elaborate further.

"So," said Dumbledore, now. Draco could feel his gaze on the back of his head. "Draco. You don't seem to be enjoying the party."

"I'm just tired, Professor."

"Yes. One would imagine you might be." Dumbledore came to stand near the fire; Draco edged away to give him room. He heard Dumbledore sigh. "So. Who was that girl and what was in the message she gave you?"

Draco turned swiftly and saw the Headmaster's sharp blue eyes on him. "You saw her?"

Dumbledore nodded. "One of the Singapore Malfoys, if I'm not mistaken. I recognize the gold poppies."

"How did you know she gave me a message?"

"It was obvious she was at the party merely because of you. She sought you out across the dance floor, and as soon as she had...danced with you, she vanished."

"Girls seek me out all the time," Draco felt compelled to point out. "It hardly makes this a red-letter day."

"It's refreshing to see that your vanity is intact, Draco. I'm sure girls do seek you out, as you say, but...girls who bear the Dark Mark?"

Draco started slightly. "Did she? I didn't see it."

"You hadn't borrowed a pair of Fred and George Weasley's X-Ray Specs."

Draco almost smiled. "Do those things really work?"

Now Dumbledore's eyes did twinkle. "I think they work extremely well." He sobered then, and his expression darkened. "Draco...what was in the message she delivered?"

Draco looked down. "The truth," he said. "And probably some lies. Headmaster..." He took a deep breath. "My father is alive."

Draco held his body tensed for the headmaster's reaction, but there was none.

"Yes," said Dumbledore mildly. "I rather thought he might be."

There was a silence then; only the crackling of the fire broke it. "There's more than that," Draco said finally. He turned and met his own reflection in the mirror again. Over his shoulder, he could see the headmaster watching him. "He's in service to Voldemort...and he was *glad* I'd killed Slytherin. He said I'd taken care of the only wizard who could possibly have been an impediment to the Dark Lord's rise."

"Did he, now." Dumbledore was looking at the fire, his face impassive. "What does that mean to you, Draco?"

"That nothing I do is right." Draco leaned forward until his forehead was resting against his clenched fist on the mantel. "Whatever part of Harry is in me....whatever that voice is that says to struggle and

not to waver and to do what's *right*... it doesn't work, not in me. I told Slytherin once that you can't do good with powers that come from Hell. I thought I was doing the right thing and all I did was clear a path for the Dark Lord's rise."

"Only if you choose to look at it that way." The Headmaster's voice was clear and steady. "Or you could look at it this way. Salazar Slytherin *was* an immensely evil, immensely powerful sorcerer. Unopposed, he would without doubt have conquered the wizarding world, and the toll of death and destruction would have been immense. *That* you prevented. We will deal with Voldemort in our own time. In any case, the battle against Slytherin was yours to fight. The battle against Voldemort...that is Harry's."

"But if I had known..."

"What would you have done differently? At what point could you have stepped aside? Life is not easy, Draco. The past tempts us, the present confuses us, and the future frightens us. No choice is simple and no one can know what the future holds. Do you think that Harry, when he chose to share the Triwizard Cup with Cedric, knew that it would result in Cedric's death? Did Sirius know that when he trusted Peter Pettigrew, it would mean the death of James and Lily? What matters is that one fragile moment, the moment of choice. If what you chose was right, no one and nothing can take that from you, not even the uncertainty of the future."

Draco didn't lift his head, but he felt a slight resettling inside himself, as if a weight had shifted. "There's one other thing," he said. "Something I don't understand."

The Headmaster raised his hand, and the fireplace poker flew into it. Draco watched out of the corner of his eye as Dumbledore poked quietly at the fire, sending up a hissing rush of colored sparks. "What is it, Draco?"

"Slytherin said that I shouldn't have been able to fight him...and for a long time I couldn't, couldn't fight the pull of the sword, couldn't act against it. And then, suddenly, I found that I could, just after I killed the manticore - something happened that made me

able to act against him. Even after he put the Dark Mark on me. It should have been impossible, shouldn't it? Slytherin said I was, must be.....defective, somehow."

"Only if love is a defect," said Dumbledore.

Draco turned his head. "What do you mean?"

"What you did...telling Harry about his parents -"

Draco winced slightly.

"Don't look like that. What you did for Harry, you did to save his life, knowing it might cost you your best friend," (at this, Draco looked slightly green) "the only other person in the world who holds a piece of your soul, just as you hold a piece of his. You aren't yourself without Harry, and Harry, whether he knows it or not, isn't himself without you. To risk that was an act of great unselfishness. Evil like Slytherin's, evil like that which prompted his acquisition of that sword, evil like that which the sword itself is made of, doesn't understand that, can't grasp it. And in losing its grasp, it lost its hold over you. If Slytherin says you are defective, it was because you were created to be what he was - a windowless room. What happened between you and Harry, the link that was forged by the Potion, cut a window into that darkness. Now you can look out and see the stars. Consider that a defect, if you wish to. I do not."

"But I saw myself...." Draco whispered, his voice steady but harsh. "I saw in the Mirror of Judgement...what I really am. I *am* defective."

"There is no Mirror of Judgement." Dumbledore's voice was sharp now with what was almost anger. "For the son of such a cynical family, you're awfully trusting. Slytherin lied to you. There was a mirror made at the same time as the Mirror of Erised, to be its twin. When you look in it, you see not what you most desire - but what you most fear. That is not reality. Those are the black terrors of your own mind." Dumbledore shook his head. "You've lived a short life, Draco Malfoy. In that short life, you've been many things. Spiteful sometimes, foolish as well; you've lied to bring harm to others, and been silent when you should have spoken out. But

you´ve changed. No mirror that does not reflect the profundity of that change is a true reflection of what you are. If you can´t see it, then trust the reflection you see in the eyes of your friends...what do they see when they look at you? What does Sirius see, what does Hermione see, what does *Harry* see? I think you know the answer to that."

Draco swallowed hard against something that had been blocking his throat for what seemed like a long time. Swallowed hard, and turned and straightened his shoulders. He looked down at his hand, where the signet ring glittered against the pale skin. Hands so much like Harry´s, the same slender articulation of bones, the same squared-off nails, the only physical remaining sign that generations ago, their forefathers had been cousins. He said, "I wanted to tell Harry about my father, but it´s his birthday - I can´t do it now. If I tell Sirius and my mother, it might wreck their wedding plans. But I should -"

"Draco." The Headmaster put a hand on his shoulder. "You told me. That´s all you need to do. Trouble will come in its own time, there is no need to run towards it. Right now, there´s a party going on just outside this room. Go to it. Enjoy yourself. Be with your friends."

Draco nodded, and went to the door. The Headmaster watched the boy as he crossed the room, the firelight striking cold silver sparks from his hair, the set of his shoulders so like that of another boy Dumbledore had once taught, another boy with silver hair and eyes like gray morning light. Lucius. Who, like his son, had been touched by destiny; the mark of something special had been on him, as it was on Draco. Whether Draco was meant for a greater good or a greater darkness, Dumbledore could not be sure. There was no way to *be* sure. He could only wait.

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"Thanks everyone," said Harry, and stifled a yawn. Hermione put her arms around him and pulled him back against her shoulder. "Best presents I´ve ever gotten."

It was just after midnight, and Harry sat amongst a pile of torn-away



wrappings in the downstairs drawing room. The party was still going on in the ballroom, although at a fraction of the crowd and volume it had been at earlier. Only a few guests were left - Percy and Honoria were snogging at a table near the windows, and Angelina and Jana were looking bored while they watched Fred and George leap in and out of a magical fountain Mad-Eye Moody had conjured up during a brief fit of good humor. Fleur and Bill had vanished. Lupin had been forced by Sirius to accompany Heidi to her London flat. Hagrid was massively asleep and snoring in a corner. The Weasley parents had long ago Apparated home, and now only what Draco privately thought of as "the family" remained - Narcissa and Sirius, Ron and Ginny, and Harry and Hermione, grouped around the dying fire, oohing and aahing over Harry's birthday gifts. Ginny had given Harry an ancient Gryffindor Galleon from the Weasley cellars, and Sirius had given him an Invisibility Cloak to replace the one destroyed by Slytherin. "I can't help thinking I'm just giving you something that will help you get into trouble," Sirius grinned over Harry's protests, "but your father wanted you to have his, so - here you go." Hermione had given him a watch, Narcissa a fancy new broomstick case, and Ron had given him an object which made Hermione shriek out loud with laughter when it was unwrapped - a round black ball with a clear glass window cut into it. One was supposed to ask it a question and then shake it, and words would appear in the window in answer to the query. "A *real* Magic 8-Ball," Hermione giggled. "Ask it something, Harry."

Harry looked for a moment hesitant and serious; then his face relaxed into a smile, and he asked, "Will I get into trouble with the Invisibility Cloak Sirius gave me?"

Everyone gathered round to see the words form in the glass window: *Of course you will, Harry.*

Hermione pealed with laughter. Ron plucked it out of Harry's hand and examined it thoughtfully. "Is Honoria really wearing leopard-skin underwear?" he demanded.

*Not at the moment,* said the ball.

"Gracious," said Ginny. "It really does work, doesn't it?" She poked it with her finger. "Will Draco ever wear leather trousers again?"

As everyone crowded around giggling, Draco looked up and over at Harry. *Potter*, he thought. *Could I talk to you for a second?*

Harry looked up, over Ron's bent head. *What, here?*

Draco had stood up, quiet as a cat, and backed away from the group. He crossed the room to the far wall, which was a bank of windows, and turned back to face Harry. *Over here. Just for a second.*

Harry got to his feet, extricating himself without much trouble from the giggling group, said something quietly in Hermione's ear, and came over to stand near Draco. Draco watched him as he crossed the room, and thought to himself with no little surprise that Harry did seem different, somehow, subtly. He had given so much thought to how recent events had changed him, and had not thought how they might have changed Harry. Harry seemed both more confident now and quieter, as if he had found a still center to himself he had not previously known he possessed. There was also about him an air of sadness, a melancholy-prince sorrow that Draco both empathized with, and felt responsible for. *It's my fault.*

"What is it, Malfoy?" asked Harry neutrally, once he was within speaking range. He leaned against the window next to Draco, his hands in his pockets, a small smile on his lips. "You look a bit dire."

Whatever carefully prepared speech Draco might have had in his head melted like snow in June thanks to his wholly unexpected sudden onslaught of nerves. "Birthday present," he croaked, and held out his hand, and the object in it, to Harry.

"What's this?" Harry asked, looking down, the smile on his face only

just fading to be replaced by a look of blank curiosity. "Is it a Pensieve?"

Draco nodded. He seemed to be having trouble finding the proper words. "Yes," he said finally. "It has my memories in it. Memories of - dying. My memories of your parents. Their ghosts, anyway."

Harry stiffened. His face went blank, smooth and unreadable. Feeling that he had made a horrible mistake, Draco said nothing. He glanced over at the others, who were still playing with the 8-Ball and paying the boys no attention at all. Surely Hermione wouldn't have let him go ahead with this if she'd thought that Harry would -

"Your *memories*?" Harry echoed finally. "My....parents?"

Draco's hands were wet with sweat. He said, "I know it's not an ordinary sort of birthday present. Hell, it's not an ordinary sort of anything. I'd have given you this, though, even if it wasn't your birthday. You have a right to it, Potter. You should have been the one down there, not me."

"Ah," said Harry, and the ghost of a smile flitted across his face, "so I should have been the one who died, then?"

Draco unclenched his hands. "You know that's not what I meant." He looked more closely at Harry. "But I know, if you could go there and come back - and knew you could come back - you would go."

"I know." Harry reached out and took Draco's gift, eyes dark. "I would, wouldn't I?"

"Potter--"

"I don't know when I'll be able to look at this," added Harry, with perfect honesty, his hand tight on the rim of the Pensieve.

"No," said Draco, and looked back at his reflection in the dark window. The image in the glass was shadowy: he could see only the outline of his own face, the curve of chin and cheekbone, the grooves at his temples. Seen like this he and Harry didn't look so

different. "But you have the *right*."

"Yeah," said Harry. "I guess I do."

"You won't like everything you hear and see," said Draco.

"No," said Harry. "I don't expect to."

"I didn't want to hurt you any more," said Draco. His voice was dry. "Still don't. But otherwise -"

"I was jealous," said Harry calmly.

Draco blinked. "You were what?"

"I was jealous," said Harry. His eyes were dark malachite in the shadowy half-light. "You got to see my parents and I didn't. I was jealous and it tore me up inside." He lifted the Pensieve, slightly. "This makes it better."

"Nothing can fix what I did to you," said Draco.

"Maybe," said Harry. "Maybe not."

Draco looked down at his hand where it rested on the windowsill. Harry followed his gaze. He noticed with a faint surprise the heavy onyx ring that swallowed up Draco's slender finger. It was new; he didn't remember it. A birthday present perhaps.

"What about next year?" said Draco suddenly.

"Next year?" Harry was lost.

"Next *school* year. Back at Hogwarts. Are we friends there, or not? Do we talk to each other? Ignore each other? Pass in the hallways without speaking?"

"Er..." Harry was still a bit lost. "Is that what you *want*?"

Draco said, "No."

"Everyone knows we´re brothers now." Harry said this very simply, with no emphasis on the word *brothers*. He saw Draco react to it anyway; his eyes flashed a darker gray for a moment.

"I suspect," said Draco, "that they all assume we´re suffering rather horribly over that fact."

Harry meditated for a moment. "We´re team captains against each other next year," he said, thoughtfully. "The Gryffindor-Slytherin rivalry is very important to both houses, and let´s face it, we´re the figureheads for it. Plus, everyone in my house will look funny at me if I start hanging about with you, and as for you, I don´t even like to think what the Slytherins´ll do to you if you start hanging about with me."

"Probably it will involve some kind of scaffold," said Draco.

"I´m afraid there´s nothing for it," began Harry.

"Oh," Draco´s voice sounded a bit brittle, "so we´re not friends then? Good, then, I just thought we ought to clear that up and -"

"We´ll have to fake it," finished Harry.

"Fake it? Fake what?" Now Draco looked lost.

"Hating each other of course," said Harry. "Can´t let everyone down, can we?"

"But we´ll know we don´t hate each other?"

"Right," said Harry, with a grin.

"You´re mad, Potter."

"So says the *Daily Prophet*," agreed Harry. "Of course, that was because you told them I drool."

"Oh, right." Now Draco smiled, grudgingly. "I guess it won't be that hard to fake it. Will it?"

"Criminally easy, I suspect."

"So do we still get to hit each other? I want to be clear on the rules."

"Pull your punches, Malfoy. That's all I'm asking. And no Unforgivable Curses."

Draco grinned. "That's a pretty cunning plan there, Potter..."

"...For a Gryffindor. I know," Harry finished for him.

Draco didn't say anything. Harry looked over at him and saw that his gaze was locked on a spot across the room. He followed Draco's line of sight to the fireplace, where the rest of their companions were grouped around the fireplace. Sirius sat beside Narcissa on the long sofa, the firelight bringing out the laughter in his dark eyes and sparkling on the beading of her dress. On the carpet by the fire sat Hermione, her head bent over the magic ball, her right hand loosely playing with the topaz charm around her throat. She wasn't beautiful in the flamboyant way that Fleur was, or Narcissa, but the line of her profile was pure and clean and lovely in the shadowy half-light, and her mouth was curved into a smile. Next to her sat Ron, and the scar on his hand was very black in the light, but his eyes were blue and full of laughter. Ginny sat at his feet, her hair turned to flaming amber by the firelight, her hand on Hermione's shoulder as she giggled. Harry couldn't tell what the others were doing, what they were laughing at, but it didn't matter; they were happy, and the happiness radiated out from them like a wave, touching Draco and Harry where they stood at its outskirts, drawing them in.

As they both gazed, Hermione glanced up from the ball she was studying, smiled as if it was perfectly natural to see them standing and gazing like that, and returned her eyes to the small glass window.

Harry turned sideways, looked at Draco, and saw a small half-smile playing around the corners of his mouth. Harry reached out and put his hand on Draco's shoulder. It was as brotherly a gesture as he knew how to make. It felt odd for a moment; and then the oddness went away, replaced by an even odder feeling of rightness. "Malfoy," he said. "What are you looking like that for? What are you looking at?"

For a moment Draco didn't respond. His eyes were calm, contained and containing, as Draco was always contained, but nevertheless filled with a strong and indefinable and familiar emotion. It could have been joy or sadness, anger or agony, regret or remorse or a mixture of all of those. Then the look faded. He turned to Harry and smiled; a genuine smile, a seventeen-year-old boy's smile, with happiness in it, and not a little mischief.

"My happy memory," he said.

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REFERENCES:

The sword Terminus Est and its attendant magical powers belongs to Gene Wolfe's Books of the New Sun, specifically Shadow of the Torturer.

"They're getting all sweaty" and "I stand by my terminology." -- BtVS (Buffy.)

"It's entirely pointy." -- Buffy.

Honoria Glossop is a character from PG Wodehouse's series of Jeeves and Wooster books. She does indeed reside in Totleigh Towers.

"If it was a blind albino penguin and hadn't gotten any in years." -- Blackadder, Season Two, "Head."

"The past tempts us, the present confuses us, and the future frightens us. No choice is simple and no one can know what the future holds." -- Babylon Five.

All art in this document was drawn by Monica Starling, except the cover picture, by Taylor.

